

(Re)conceptualizing street fiction: A critical analysis of discourses, dialogical dynamics,
and pedagogical possibilities

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Abstract

As popular genre of novels predominantly written by African American and Latinx authors, street fiction is often characterized in terms of the sex, violence, and illicit activities present in its narratives set in low socioeconomic urban communities across the United States. Street fiction's popularity has soared since the early 2000s, and several authors who formerly self-published their novels and sold them through grassroots channels now sign lucrative contracts with major publishers. The purpose of this study is to offer a recontextualized description of street fiction exploring its ideological, political and cultural connections to other spheres of influence including: the tradition of the American novel, African American literary history and theories, popular fictions, and hip hop. Using critical discourse analysis and cultural studies as combined methodologies, I offer a dialogic analysis of three themes present in four examples of the genre, namely: 1) ambivalence between "straight" lives and "street" lives, 2) the interplay between constructions of "self" and "other" in street fiction, and 3) the dynamics between the "real" and the "fantastic" elements in the novels. I offer a concluding analysis of how the literacy practices surrounding street fiction dovetail with key conversations in the field of English, including the definition of literature, the relationships among authors, readers and texts, the purpose of reading and writing fiction, and the notion of books as both cultural artifacts and commodities.

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Dedication

To Hank, Ginette and Cecile, for being my first (and best) teachers;

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Chapter One: Getting Acquainted With Street Fiction

The purpose of this study is to broaden the conceptual lenses through which street fiction is viewed and to offer an analysis of some of the thematic contradictions that recur in four sample texts from the genre. As an introduction, I present two encounters with street fiction that framed my initial explorations of this area of inquiry. The first is a memory of one of the first times my students' interests in street fiction came to my attention as a high school English teacher. Since the recollection I offer here is imperfect and susceptible to "bias" stemming from "distortions and unconscious influences that are related to current knowledge and beliefs" (Schacter, 2000, p. 120), I present it not as a data, but as a narrative that helps explain my relationship to street fiction.

The second component of the introduction is an excerpt from a transcript of one session of a street fiction reading and writing workshop I observed as a student-researcher during the first year of my doctoral program. During the workshop, I listened and recorded data as teenagers discussed a street fiction book with a seasoned author, activist and scholar. Taken together, the memory and transcript capture two of the milestone moments in my ongoing learning about street fiction. Unlike many street fiction readers who may take up the genre at a younger age, I was an adult when I first learned about it. As a White woman who grew up in a rural New England town, and I did not encounter street fiction until I taught high school in an urban setting. Although my identity and history with the genre situate me as a secondary rather than primary audience for street fiction texts, I hope this study will offer some insight to readers who may be interested in learning more about the histories, thematic complexities, and contradictions that shape the genre.

From The English Classroom: A Memory

I work at a school situated on a hill near a famous park where tourists snap photos of quintessentially Victorian row houses. Light streams through the tall windows of my English classroom as four girls sit at a round, pale blue table chatting over lunches of short order Chinese food, Popeye's chicken and biscuits, and deli sandwiches they bought at the restaurants nearest to the school. My classroom used to be the school library until the funding for such luxuries was cut in many of the city's public schools. The architectural remnants of the library make for great ambiance in an English class, and I count myself lucky to have comfortable tables and chairs, a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf spanning entire wall, and plenty space for kids to lounge on beanbags in one corner of the room. I sit at my desk not far away from the girls, but I am busy grading, eating my lunch, and checking email in the precious moments between classes. I am vaguely aware of the content of their conversation—one girl is teasing another about a crush she has on a boy in her neighborhood. "Shut up!" the girl tells her friend through an embarrassed grin. Giggles peel through the room.

This was my first teaching job after finishing my credential at a nearby state university, and I was as eager as I was inexperienced. I was theoretically prepared, but I also knew I still had a lot to learn. Since students could come to our school from any of the public schools or youth incarceration centers in the city at any time, I had to be ready to acclimate someone new to my classroom without notice. I was strong in my convictions that English classrooms *can* be transformative, powerful places, and that reading, writing and thinking in response to a wide variety of texts is essential for personal and professional growth. I was also keenly aware that my students may not share my convictions since their schooling experiences have differed from mine. I come to school each day with a sense of possibility and the full force of my degrees and

privileges behind me. As much as they try to play it off, many of my students come to school most days feeling the weight of the stigma they carry from attending continuation school. The reason they first set foot in the door of our school is because the district noted that they are sufficiently behind in credits to merit being labeled “at risk” for failing to graduate. They play it cool, but I know the threat of failure looms large—I can see it in their sullen faces and furrowed brows when we meet with their parents for academic advising at the end of every quarter. The relief from this pressure is visible in the students’ tears when they stepped up to shake hands with the principal and collect their diplomas at every graduation.

Like most urban teachers, I was White and most of my students were not. When it came to race and ethnicity, many of them checked multiple boxes on forms to most accurately represent their identities. Most were American. Some immigrated to the U.S. from places like Columbia, Cambodia, Laos, Russia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Mexico. They lived in neighborhoods all over the city, and most of their families did their best to keep the kids on track. A few were in gangs, but this caused little conflict in the school since any affiliations were always declared to the administration prior to enrollment. The two continuation high schools in the city coordinated admissions so as to avoid rival groups intersecting at school. School was school, and students did their best to filter out the things that took place at home or in the neighborhood while they tried to learn. Some days, this was harder than others. When someone’s young cousin died in a neighborhood shooting, when someone’s single mom was evicted from an apartment, or when someone had to leave school early to take care of siblings, school took a back seat. It had to.

One of the girls turns on the radio that sits at the back of the room. It is set to a local station that plays mostly hip-hop, and Too Short’s unmistakable voice immediately elicits a sing-

along from the girls eating lunch. I bob my head and whisper the words of the chorus along with them. One of them sees me and points. “You know this song? What d’you know about Too Short?” she asks. “Yeah, I know it,” I say. “Who doesn’t? It’s on the radio every ten minutes. What d’you think—I live in a bubble? I do have a life outside of this place, you know,” I say with a smile. She laughs, looking at me, shaking her head. “What? You think when I go home I just sit in my rocking chair and knit booties for my cats?” I say. “That’s exactly what we thought, Miss!” one girl teases. “You probably going home and baking brownies an’ sh—...stuff, like Betty Crocker!” says another. We all laugh.

The girls light up and turn their attention to a copy of Sister Souljah’s novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever* that Lexi has taken out of her bag. “Did you get to the part where she has the accident? I still can’t believe she got pregnant by that guy, yo. I would not have let that man touch me!” said Cleo. “I know, right? But like, my auntie was kinda in the same situation with one of her boyfriends, and she just could not see how bad he was—she was just hella in love with him, like she was blind to his problems,” said Kaylah. The girls nod in understanding. They go on talking about some of the decisions the protagonist makes in the novel, affectionately critiquing her choices but acknowledging the difficulties she encountered. They evaluated several characters’ motivations using evidence from the text, swapped personal experiences relevant to the story, and applied social and historical knowledge to their readings. Lexi turns to me: “Miss V., you ever read this?” “No. You like it?” I ask. Lexi nods earnestly. “What’s good about it?” I ask. “You gotta read this. This chick be dealin’ with stuff that’s *real*.”

I listened casually but intently to their impromptu literary analysis. I wondered why it was so easy for them to talk about *this* book, and why they might be reluctant to use the same skills in the context of English class in the very same room, at the very same desks. I knew I

owed it to them to take Lexi up on her recommendation and read the book.

From a Street Fiction Reading and Writing Workshop: A Transcript

Sofia is an Afro-Latina writer and activist who is also the instructor for a youth workshop on fiction. She is discussing Esperanza (Espy) and Jesus, two characters in one of her street fiction novels. Kaia, a student who has just begun to read Sofia's novel, doesn't want to see Jesus come back into Espy's life. This discussion builds from that starting point.

Sofia:

I call him Jesus [pronounced "hay-soos"]. I don't correct people when they call him Jesus because there's a reason why he's called Jesus, alright? [Laughs.] [...] And, um, the question they posed to me as the writer, was um... "Does Jesus really love Espy?" And my answer was, well, if you're asking me, you know the activist, the feminist, [laughs] you know, the... I would have to... even though I'm the person who created him, right? I would tell you, probably not. And... I don't know how far you are in the book, but there is a quote, Espy comes across a quote by bell hooks where she says love and abuse cannot....coexist.

Kaia:

Oprah says something like that.

Sofia:

Right, she's probably been reading bell hooks. Um [laughs]. I would like to think Oprah was reading bell hooks. Um [laughs]. So she, she says love and abuse cannot coexist. That you know like, there's a lot of ways, you know we try to rationalize the coexistence of love and abuse, that he beats her because he loves her so much and bell hooks is like that is nonsense. [Laughs.] Right? There's something else goin' on there... maybe some real strong feelings, maybe some... but it's not love because... she uses M. Scott Peck's definition of love and M. Scott Peck was a, was a, uh, psychologist.

Kaia:

I question that though.

Sofia:

Yeah. Uh what? Whether love and abuse can coexist?

Kaia:

Yeah.

Sofia:

So uh, yeah, and that's a great debate to have, that's exactly why I put it in the book because I wanted to have, I wanted people, especially women to have this conversation, like what is love and what is it and what isn't it? And...how much of what we say is what we've been socialized to believe love is is actually to our detriment, is to somebody else's advantage... They tell us that this is what love is because it socializes us to behave in certain ways that suits them, even if it's not in our self-interest and that's one of the things I wanted to use this book to explore... But! If you were to ask Jesus as a character, as a person or anybody who is like him, he's a composite of all kinds of people, he's an archetype of some sort (we've seen that guy, right)? You couldn't tell him he doesn't love Espy. If you asked Jesus if he loves Espy, he's like, "I love her *down*."

The first memory I shared shows how street fiction caught my attention during my first year as a teacher at a West Coast alternative school. I thought of myself as a fairly progressive teacher since I was already using popular texts in my classroom. I taught a unit on the hero's journey in Japanese anime using films and series that students brought to the class, used hip-hop or pop songs to connect to poems or novels we read, and I took students on field trips all over the city for everything from comedy shows to art festivals. Popular texts were rich enough for study in their own right, and they encouraged critical thinking when we put them in conversation with more traditional texts found in the English classroom. Students approached popular texts with more license and confidence, and the skills they used to think and write about the popular created a bridge to less familiar texts. In short, I thought I was making all the right pedagogical moves with popular texts, but street fiction tested the limits of my belief that all texts could be worthy of study in the English classroom. Could I use these texts featuring sex, violence and criminality in my classroom? If so, how? Were they "good" enough to read in class? What about the glamorized consumerism, the stereotyping of black men, the offensive language, the objectification of Black women? What would I be telling my students (who were predominantly

people of color from urban neighborhoods) I thought of them if I required them to read street fiction? Was reading Sister Souljah inferior to reading Shakespeare or Sherman Alexie?

Though I read some of the books students shared and I gave students credit for reading street fiction novels independently, I wasn't ready to use them in class. Still, it bothered me that I was setting these books out of bounds, and the questions about street fiction lingered throughout my teaching career. Why did students who so voraciously and adeptly read street fiction novels approach texts like *Of Mice and Men* with insecurity or reluctance? What could I learn from my students' street fiction reading practices that would inform their in-school literate identities?

The transcript I shared is a moment from a street fiction reading and writing workshop I observed as a research assistant during my doctoral program. The participants had access to a complex semiotic field to understand the discussion—everything from the street fiction novel they were reading to Oprah and bell hooks. Their conversation was as philosophical and sociological as it was literary as they considered the abusive relationship between Espy, the protagonist, and Jesus, a major character in the novel. Kaia and Sofia use a variety of registers fluidly as they use language to situate themselves in relationship to the text and each other. This brief exchange illustrates why I have continued to study street fiction; there is so much to learn about the way its readers take up the texts, the reasons its authors write it, and the worlds that are described and created in its pages. Plenty of naysayers and proponents have debated the merits of the genre, but in this study, I set aside a binary view. Thanks to the young readers of street fiction I've met, I approach the texts in a spirit of critical love and with a sense of pedagogical possibility.

What Is Street Fiction?

Street fiction, sometimes called “ghetto lit,” “gangsta lit,” “hip-hop lit” or “urban fiction,” is a thriving literary genre (Hill, Pérez, & Irby, 2008; Marshall, Staples, & Gibson, 2009; Young, 2006). Street fiction is not monolithic; there are a range of messages, voices, authorial intentions and voices in this cadre of stories. Because street fiction is an umbrella term, it “encompass[es] genres such as chick lit, lad lit, urban fantasy, speculative fiction, urban erotica (e.g., Zane), and street lit” (Morris, 2011). The harsh, well-documented realities of urban communities, including crime, under-education, lack of jobs, poverty, and inadequate housing, thread through the terrain and are often central to the conflicts faced by the characters (Davis, 2003; Van Orman & Lyiscott, 2013).

As a starting point for this study, I define *street fiction* as a category of novels with specific characteristics, including “gritty, uncompromising language,” “sex and extreme violence,” and plots that take place in urban settings (Marshall et al., 2009). The plots wind around the lives of characters who are predominantly Black or Latinx youth attempting to meet the challenges associated with living in economically poor urban communities. Street fiction stories move quickly; making them feel like movies as they flash back to key moments in the characters’ lives (Morris, 2011). The geopolitical and imagined space of “the street” is the central location of all action, and it is almost a character in and of itself in many tales. The young protagonists in the novels (usually ages “nineteen to twenty-five”) form identities by negotiating strong, complex challenges along the lines of race, class, and gender (Morris, 2011). Money, capitalism and commodification play central roles in the texts—characters may struggle to get money, or they may spend fantastic amounts to buy luxury, brand-name goods (Baldridge, Connelly, & Van Orman, 2013; Morris, 2011; Marshall et al., 2009). Taken together,

the aforementioned features of street fiction offer a hint as to why the genre is experiencing continued growth and popularity among urban youth. Though critics repeatedly flinch at the graphic sex and violence present in street fiction novels, *only* noticing or describing the most salacious moments leads to a reductive view of the genre. In this study, I suggest a revision in the conceptualization(s) of street fiction to better situate it among its many spheres of influence including hip-hop, African-American literature and literacies, the tradition of the American novel, and (African) American film noir.

Without a doubt, street fiction sells. Once a grassroots self-publication phenomenon, the genre is now a full-fledged industry. Originally, street fiction authors sold their homespun novels in places like barber shops, churches, hair salons, or even out of the trunks of their cars (Hill et al., 2008). For instance, Author Teri Woods began selling her street fiction novel *True to the Game* in 1998, and she claims she has sold roughly 1.2 million copies since she set foot in the world of self-publication (North, 2012). K'wan Foye, a street fiction author who has published more than 20 novels, describes the way his publishing methods have changed: “ ‘Initially we weren't getting [publishing] advances,’ Foye recalls. ‘We made our money from our hustle, the out-of-the-trunk hustle. So when the major publishers came in, they started throwing these advances like, “Hey, this is what it is: I'll give you six figures if you write two or three books.” And you're like, “Wow, you're going to give me six figures up front — all mine?” So, off to the races.’ ” (Dreisinger, 2014).

Though one can still walk down 125th Street in Harlem and see the books arranged on folding tables ready for purchase, one can just as readily find them on the shelves of both local and nationally franchised bookstores. Hundreds of thousands of street fiction books are sold each year, and some of the genre's most celebrated authors, like Vickie Stringer, have contracted

with major publishing houses to sell their novels under trade labels (Rosen, 2004). While Stringer's publications are sold alongside other giants of street fiction under Simon & Schuster's Atria imprint, she, like several other street fiction authors, established her own publishing company. Many librarians and bookstore owners have found a need to cultivate full sections of street fiction to accommodate the desires of their patrons (Marshall et al. 2009; Morris, 2011; Dodson, 2004). Publishers and librarians note that libraries often need to order multiple copies of popular street fiction titles since they are in such high demand (Barnard, 2008). Librarians in cities, suburbs and rural areas have added street fiction sections to their holdings, and they have published guides to the genre delineating the different subgenres and niches in an effort to meet the needs of their readers (Morris, 2011; Zellers, 2013).

Remarkably, the swift street fiction book trade rekindles the relationship among readers, authors, and booksellers in an age when print literature is experiencing a decline. Black Library Booksellers, a Boston-based company, noted that Sister Souljah's *Coldest Winter Ever* accounted for 30% of their book sales (Barnard, 2008). Street fiction authors like Renay Jackson of San Leandro, CA forge partnerships with local booksellers in urban communities to sell their novels to an eager public. Jackson, who is a custodian at the Oakland Police Department, has sold more than 35,000 copies of his books at \$13 each (Marech, 2003). Though it is difficult to pin down the exact number of street fiction books sold due to the do-it-yourself production and distribution methods of many of authors, "industry analysts say they are an increasing part of the \$300 million black book market" (Corley, 2006).

The localized, do-it-yourself nature of street fiction book sales sits in sharp contrast with financial trends that have forced major bookstores like Borders into bankruptcy (Associated Press, 2011). Authors in the genre have begun using e-book formats to get their stories into the

hands of their audiences. There are hundreds of e-books in both the paid and the free “urban fiction” categories through Amazon, and since they are ranked by popularity, readers can find top selling/downloaded titles with just a few clicks. For authors like K.C. Blaze whose novel *Your Husband My Man* was named a Kindle All-Star for being one of the most downloaded books in August 2014 (Baruch 2015), the e-book avenue provides a low-cost, far-reaching platform to connect with new fans. Readers can quickly, easily and discreetly access new street fiction content, and they don’t even have to pay the full price for a hard-copy books when they use electronic means to access stories.

Street fiction may seem relatively new, but it can be traced back to the late 1960s and early 1970s with books like Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), Iceberg Slim’s *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1969), Donald Goines’ *Dopefiend* (1971) and his *Kenyatta* series (1974–1975). The progenitors of street fiction featured mainly male protagonists, the books are currently most popular among young African-American women and Latinas ages 13 to 30, especially those who live in urban areas (Rosen, 2004). We know less about the young men who read street fiction, but it is clear they comprise a growing portion of the readership (Stovall, 2005). One need only glance at the covers of the newest titles of major street fiction publishing houses to see that some are likely marketed to young men, others to young women (Baldrige et al., 2013). Burgeoning street fiction sub-markets continue to emerge; swaths of stories now target Christian, Muslim, and lesbian, gay, transgender and queer readers (Morris, 2011).

Harsh Words: Street Fiction Controversies

It may go without saying that street fiction matters to the writers who write it and the readers who read it. But why should scholars or educators concern themselves with it? Street

fiction is controversial entertainment. In my view, too many people approach street fiction with dismissive criticism or “polite disregard” that mimic the ways in which African-American literary productions have historically been discounted by White critics (Van Orman & Lyiscott, 2013). This phenomenon dehumanizes street fiction readers and writers, and it does not attend to the powerful and problematic contents of the text with any nuance. Furthermore, this dismissal blinds scholars and educators to a repository of storytelling and meaning-making that may illuminate certain aspects of Black life in America (Sweeney, 2012). Street fiction raises important questions about how and why people read, what constitutes “literature,” which kinds of reading matter, and who gets to make determinations about the worthiness of texts, especially when it comes to determining which texts merit study in classrooms (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2000). In this section, I hope to provide a brief overview of the controversy and interest in street fiction and show why it may be ripe for scholarly attention.

Readers who don’t read? Some of the fuss about street fiction stems from the fact that the young urban people of color who comprise the majority of the books’ readership overlap demographically with the population that, due to a variety of social and economic inequities, historically struggle to succeed in school (Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007; Gibson, 2010). The ubiquitous, long-standing problem of underserving schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged urban areas is one of the most important issues facing education today (Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Staggering consequences exist for undereducated, racially and socioeconomically minoritized youth. According to data on state prisons from the U.S. Department of Justice, “Blacks are incarcerated at a rate that is 5.1 times that of Whites. [...] Hispanics are held in state prisons at an average rate of 378 per 100,000, producing a disparity

ratio of 1.4:1 compared to Whites” (Nellis, 2016).

The aforementioned social problems disproportionately affect people who live in the same communities as the characters in street fiction novels. Given the high stakes linked to low literacy levels, educators, parents, and community members are naturally concerned with the literacies of urban youth. A dominant narrative springing from the grim statistics about the school-to-prison pipeline suggests that Black and Latinx youth don’t read. As Vickie Stringer observed: “They thought the average consumer would be young, Black, and they didn’t think we would spend the money. [...] Most publishers give our communities no credit for reading — but we’re proving them wrong every day” (Cunningham, 2005). Street fiction reading practices undoubtedly challenge the myth Stringer describes. A single major street fiction release routinely sells more than 100,000 copies (Munshi, 2015). Librarians have been quick to embrace street fiction based on the high demand from their readers, and they have written guides to help their colleagues understand the various aspects of the genre (Zellers, 2013; Morris, 2011). To them, all reading is good reading, and they use the features of street fiction that most interest readers to guide them to other books they will enjoy. Whether or not all of this reading is “good” for young people is up for debate, and it is my hope that this study will inform future conversations about street fiction by shedding light on the contexts, themes and tensions within the genre.

Critical concern. Many critics lament street fiction’s quality, morality, substance, and place within the African-American literary tradition (Venable, McQuillar, & Mingo, 2004; Stovall, 2005; Chiles, 2006; Brooks & Savage, 2009). If educators and scholars are to understand the problems or possibilities inherent in street fiction, it is worth unpacking some of the

arguments that have taken place over the genre. From the standpoint of craft, critics first point out that street fiction is often poorly edited with limited vocabulary and plot inconsistencies. Therefore, it serves as a poor model of writing for its readers. Daniel Marcou, a Minnesota corrections librarian and owner of the website Streetfiction.org recalls one such editing error that made him laugh. In one story, a robber was said to have run away with the “lute” instead of the “loot.” “I still imagine a street thug hauling ass with a medieval stringed instrument,” said Marcou (Rice, 2009).

When street fiction authors were predominantly self-publishing their books, they naturally did not have the benefit of professional editorial support (Hill et al., 2008). The quality of editing and printing of many of the books has become more professional over time, especially when publishing houses became involved in the process. However, there are still a number of independently published texts that lack editorial polish, especially with the boom of e-publishing in recent years. Criticism for the quality of the books has also come from within the genre, and a number of business have cropped up offering to help new writers edit address language, structure or content problems in their work. For instance, Mary McBeth of Urban Fiction Editor offers a wide range of support services for several urban genres. Her most comprehensive package includes “line editing, content editing and proofreading plus significant content re-writes of up to 20% of [the] entire document when necessary” at a cost of \$5.99 per page (urbanfictioneditor.com). In spite of the trends toward more professional books, poorly edited street fiction books are still abundant in the marketplace. Readers choose a particular title based on multiple criteria, not just the quality of the editing. They may look for stories that take place in the cities they call home, featuring particular types of characters, or offering exciting sex or action scenes (to name just a few). What remains to be seen is whether readers, as they are met

with a greater number of books with a more sophisticated look and feel, will favor these books over less polished ones.

The world inside of street fiction novels can be brutal, and critics fret over the impact lurid aspects of the books have on their readers. Many worry the books normalize dangerous sexual relationships, sexual and physical abuse, drug dealing and use, and criminal behavior (Cox, 2004). In the hands of young people, they argue, these images and attitudes are especially volatile. Some argue that the characters are flat, stereotypical and unoriginal and that they present a one-dimensional view of urban Black life (Brooks & Savage, 2009). The proliferation of the same-old characters and plots in hundreds of novels bothered popular author Omar Tyree so much, he vowed to completely change the direction of his writing when his publisher told him that one of his more recent books was not gritty enough for the marketplace (Nix, 2008). Though some categorize his work as street fiction or urban fiction, Tyree calls his books “urban classics” and refers to himself an “issues writer” (Watkins, 2007). He explains the new shift in his writing as follows:

Teri Woods, Vickie Stringer, Nikki Turner, Shannon Holmes, K’wan, and several others, related to my “urban classics” alone, and they began to match it, writing from their own sources of hardcore street knowledge. And I can’t knock them for writing their honest stories. I can’t knock them for wanting to be published. I can’t knock them for earning an honest living. But after awhile, as dozens of other new writers began to follow in their footsteps, creating more gold-digging, ghetto girl, gangster love, drug-dealer stories, I had to seriously ask myself, “Don't we have some other things to write about it?” [...] if the only way I can earn a living now in African-American adult fiction is to sell my people the same poison that they've become addicted to, then I quit with my artistic integrity still intact, while moving on to a more progressive mission. (Nix, 2008)

Since the time of this interview, Tyree has gone on to fulfill his promise to expand his writing repertoire. He wrote the novel *Corrupted*, a serial e-book centered on the dark side of the publishing industry in 2011, and in 2013, he published *The Traveler: Welcome to Dubai* in

which his central protagonist Gary Stevens falls in love with a Muslim woman and becomes entangled in a hostage crisis when a group of radicals hold tourists hostage. The plots and characters signal an altogether different kind of storytelling than what is currently found in street fiction.

Alternatively, authors like Wahida Clark (*Thugs and the Women Who Love Them, Justify My Thug*) embrace the street fiction label and resist negative characterizations of their work. Clark began writing street fiction novels when she was in prison, and she has published more than fourteen books of her own. She also launched her own publishing and printing company, W. Clark Publishing (Bailey, 2011). “My male and female characters are very strong,” Ms. Clark said. “The males and the females are college-educated, but they just went down the wrong path and ended up a thug. But they love hard. They’re providers. They’re sexy. They’re fine. The women like that. They identify with that. And if they don’t have a brother like the brothers in my books, they say, ‘I want one just like it.’ And the brothers, too” (Sands, 2013). The different perspectives of Tyree and Clark show the contradictions surrounding the representations of urban lives and landscapes in street fiction. It also shows two different points of view when it comes to what authors owe their readers. Tyree implies that as a Black writer he has a responsibility to bring his readers places beyond the street, whereas Clark’s comments suggest an investment in investigating the pleasures and complications associated with “thug” life.

Culture clash. Street fiction critics often bemoan the conflation of the genre with canonical African-American literature and assert that the graphic, violent content in street fiction distorts the realities of African-American life (Cox, 2004; Griffin, 2004; Chiles, 2006; Brooks, & Savage, 2009). In one of the most frequently cited critiques, author Nick Chiles wrote an

opinion piece for the *New York Times* titled “Their Eyes Were Reading Smut” outlining the reasons behind the frustration and embarrassment he feels as an African-American author when he sees his literary efforts sharing shelf space in bookstores with what he calls “pornography for Black women” (2006). According to Chiles, street fiction titles are “nasty books...pairing off back in the stockrooms like little paperback rabbits and churning out even more graphic offspring that make Ralph Ellison books cringe into a dusty corner” (2006). He further cautions the “purveyors of crassness” (2006) responsible for street fiction to consider their legacy:

That leaves me wondering where we -- writers, publishers, readers, the Black community—go from here. Is street fiction some passing fad, or does it represent our future? It's depressing that this noble profession, one that I aspired to as a child from the moment I first cracked open James Baldwin and Gabriel García Márquez about 30 years ago, has been reduced by the greed of the publishing industry and the ways of the American marketplace to a tasteless collection of pornography.

I realize that publishing is a business, but publishers also have a responsibility to balance street lit with more quality writing. After all, how are we going to explain ourselves to the next generation of writers and readers who will wonder why they have so little to read of import and value produced in the early 21st century, why their founts of inspiration are so parched?

Yet people like Albert Johnson would beg to differ with Chiles. Together, Kejuan Muchita (also known as Havoc) and Albert Johnson (or Prodigy) are Mobb Deep, a highly successful East Coast hip-hop group. Johnson spent about ten years crafting a novel, *H.N.I.C.*, that partially deals with the three-year prison term he served for gun possession. He says his writing purpose stems from a desire to teach young people that jail is not “where you want to be,” and that his voice is more authentic because he “knows the system and how it works” (Dreisinger, 2014). Like many other street fiction authors, he hopes his story will caution others away from criminal behavior. His philosophy fits well with his publisher, Akashic Books in Brooklyn, whose motto is “reverse gentrification of the literary world” (Ibid.). This image of subversion shows how street fiction has the potential to critique the powerful publishing industry where

African-American authors have often struggled to have their voices heard. (Ibid.). Whether or not authors and publishers are harnessing this power is part of what I will consider in this study.

Youth Studying Street Fiction: A Foundation

In 2011, I was part of a team of three researchers led by Marc Lamont Hill who studied a street fiction reading and writing workshop over a period of eleven weeks. The host site, a literacy/youth development program in New York City, regularly offered workshops centering on hip-hop, journalism, college preparation, creative writing (including spoken word and poetry) to urban youth ages 16–22. It reached roughly 15,000 young people annually. The free workshop was advertised through their network, and anyone who chose to enroll was welcome to participate.

A member of our research team worked at the site, and she was able to connect us with a local award-winning street fiction author willing to conduct the workshop. The researchers held two meetings with the workshop leader (May and June, 2011) to discuss our research goals, and familiarize ourselves with her plans for the curriculum. She wanted participants to critically analyze street fiction content and cover imagery, write responses to street fiction texts, and develop original works of fiction. *Picture Me Rollin'* by Black Artemis was the central text used by the group. I attended the workshop on alternating weeks to observe, capture field notes, and record videos of each session. The research team met as a team to review and reflect on data on a bi-weekly basis. I completed independent data analysis of my field notes, memos and videos in preparation for our meetings.

Some notable obstacles impeded the research. Although they were asked to

commit to the project in its entirety, several participants were absent from weekly sessions. This was challenging since the workshop leader sometimes had to backtrack to make sure everyone could have common ground for discussions and activities, which of course took time away from her original plans for the session. A core group of five students did attend regularly, and I present their voices here. The participants had varied interests in street fiction; some were more keen on writing their own stories than reading and discussing the selected texts. Since the participants were busy with school and other obligations, it was difficult for some of them to find time to do the reading the workshop required of them. When they came to weekly sessions without having read the text, the workshop leader was required to adapt. When the workshop ended in December 2011, we did not get as far with the curriculum as we planned to at the beginning. However, as I considered the language dynamics of key moments in the workshop using critical discourse analysis, I noticed multiple discourses at play in the conversations. Using the street fiction novel as an anchor, participants employed intertexts from a variety of sources to signal their meaning-making and positions to each other and to the focal text. In the following critical discourse analysis, I study the range and depth of meaning involved in reading street fiction during this workshop.

Intertextual moments. Consider the transcript I presented at the beginning of this chapter where Sofia, the workshop leader, and Kaia, a participant, discuss the choice to reintroduce the dangerous bad-boy character Jesus into the protagonist's life in *Picture Me Rollin'*. Sofia unabashedly brings many identities to her work with youth—it is part of her philosophy to do so. Her language in this exchange signals aspects of her personal, professional, and political selves—she is a teacher, activist, feminist, scholar, writer, and consumer of popular

culture. Sofia's words, phrases and syntactical choices reflect the multiplicity that characterizes her self-representation in this moment. Official and unofficial, personal and professional, academic and private discourses converge in her comments. Her pedagogical talk is subtly but clearly marked by her many identities. By moving away from neutrality toward hybridized self-expression, Sofia opens the door for students to draw upon a range of knowledge sources in their conversations and writings.

Simply stated, intertextuality exists when one "text" (where the word here means any stretch of spoken or written language) refers to or points to another "text" (words from what others have said or written) (Gee, 2011). To meet the semiotic demands of the moment, participants must follow her from the coexisting texts of an urban fiction novel to Oprah's talk show and bell hooks' writing. They must engage in philosophical thinking that requires them to question the nature of love from a feminist perspective; must be aware of the biblical allusion involving the Jesus character; and they must understand how archetypes function in literature. Finally, they must also grasp what it means to love someone "*down*." The richness of the exchange is defined by the number and variety of texts present in their discourse. Clearly, these discourses are drawn from bodies of knowledge someone would gather across many lived contexts—one might learn about biblical references in church, archetypes in English class, and Oprah from her well-known talk show.

However, a simple awareness of these texts is likely not enough. Texts can mean something different depending upon the context and the intentions of the speaker—they are not neutral (Dyson, 2003). In this exchange, participants simultaneously read Sofia's intonation, gestures, and other context cues to understand why Sofia "hopes" Oprah reads bell hooks due to her self-identified position as a feminist, scholar, and activist. Her emphasis on the word "down"

in the last line of the transcript tells the listener she is not referring to a direction, but rather a way of loving someone no matter what (as in to “hold someone down” in urban Black vernacular English). These intersections of texts and identities show how “a variety of texts might be at play, but several worlds are also intersecting for the person or people involved in the literacy event...The social world is characterised by multiple membership, it has unresolved boundaries...” (Barton and Hamilton, 2005, p. 8).

In addition, Sofia expects her audience to be able to fill in the gaps; she nudges them toward a particular understanding without finishing a thought because she trusts them to close the gap toward her intention (Gee, 2011). In other words, Sofia reads her participants while they read her. She does not need to say precisely why she chose the name Jesus for her character; she trusts that Kaia and the other participants will understand the Christ figure symbol based on her assessment of her audience. She hints at this meaning through her intonation, facial expression, and movements, but she does not need to spell it out. What Sofia leaves unsaid indicates a deep confidence in the young people’s familiarity with the Christ narrative, the concepts of symbolism and allusion in literature, and the complexities of Jesus’s character. Sofia expects the participants to follow her multi-faceted line of thinking, and her trust in their comprehension is validated in the nodding heads, knowing facial expressions, and verbal affirmations of the audience.

Within this particular community, texts serve almost as a shorthand within the grammar of the discourse. By grammar here, I do not mean the rigid set of rules we usually associate with “standard” English. I refer to grammar in the linguistic sense, as a fluid set of norms that guides a communication (Gee, 2011). Like words in a conversation, a text invoked in a particular context for a discrete purpose has a specific connotation (Gee, 2011). When a speaker mentions a text,

the listener needs to quickly draw upon her knowledge of the text and decide how it functions in the grammar of the situation. The same text could serve a different semiotic purpose at another moment, so listeners must stay closely attuned to the content and context of the speaker's remarks. For an example of this dynamic process, consider how the reference to Ice Cube movies functions in the following exchange. On this occasion, Jalisa, a participant, relates a work of street fiction she read to the narrative in Sofia's novel.

Sofia: [talking about the novel she penned]

But this is about a young woman who...did some time in prison...and like a lot of young women (this part is factual), like a lot of the young women, like there's been a spike in the population, in the female prison population, and a lot of the women who are, um...getting incarcerated now, tend to be there to protect men.

Kaia:

Shit!

Jalisa:

Wow.

Sofia:

They tend to be there protecting men, like they're taking the fall for guys, they're doin' the ride or die thing [*raises hands and turns wrists*]...or, or, um, or they are there from protecting themselves against men, so they are there because, you know they were in abusive relationships, the system failed to protect them and when push comes to shove, they had to protect themselves and [*purses lips and raises hands*] and they killed someone. They killed their abusers.

Jalisa:

I read a story like that cause this woman, she ended up going to jail...because...let me think...she ended up going to jail because like even though she knew her man was bad, like even though she knew he was bad news she was so in love with him that she just stuck around. And long story short, he got into some big trouble, and...she basically took the fall, she was like you know what, I did it...and like, she thought that he would like have her back but [*shaking her head*]...it was just a whole, like roller coaster. And when she was in prison, she would dream about the day when she would get out and kill him. But then by the end, she fell in love with this woman, and when she finally got a chance to like go kill her old man, like they ended up sleeping together cause she fell back into the trap, and even though supposedly he began to like [*raises fingers forming air*

quotes], like—

Sofia:

This sounds like an Ice Cube movie. [*Everyone laughs.*]

Jalisa:

[*Smiles.*] Yeah I know like, it was so confusing and I was like wait a minute...you love him now?

Sofia:

Was it a movie?

Jalisa:

Oh, no it was a book, actually.

Sofia:

Oh, it was a book. Okay.

Jalisa:

Yeah.

Sofia:

But it sounds like—[*Laughs.*]

Jalisa:

Yeah. Actually I'll give you the title of it later, but it's like ...it was just so like...

Sofia:

But I bet you it's a street lit book.

Jalisa:

Yeah it was. I got it off the street, I was like...but it was just like, wow.

Sofia:

Could you find out what the title is? And maybe the author?

Jalisa:

Yes, um...[*raises her hand to her chin in a thinking gesture*]...*No Love, No Pain*, Sicily.

Sofia:

We should get that. [*Laughs.*]

Jalisa elaborates the twisted intricacies of the street fiction novel she read, and Sofia

responds by saying that the plot sounds like an Ice Cube movie. Sofia is also a professional screenwriter, so she draws on her expertise to set up the relationship between the novel and the film. However, Sofia also relies on her audience's knowledge of Ice Cube movies to joke about the plot of the street fiction novel Jalisa mentions. Rather than listing characteristics of the storyline Jalisa presents, Sofia uses a textual reference as a kind of portmanteau. Again, she trusts the audience to understand her specific use of the Ice Cube movie reference without explication. Furthermore, when Sofia brings Ice Cube movies to the discourse, she knows them well enough to make a connection to their plots. Sofia's invocation of Ice Cube, then, is a maneuver that serves her communication goals *and* identifies her and her audience as insiders in relationship to African-American popular culture.

Presence of academic texts in an out-of-school space. Researchers have cautioned against thinking of academic and out-of-school spaces as worlds with fixed boundaries (Hull & Schultz, 2002). Some have conceptualized “third spaces” or interstices between these binaries where cultures, knowledge bases and identities can be leveraged favorably for the individual (Gonzalez, Moll et al., 1995; Gutiérrez, 2008). I was surprised how frequently the school world seeped in to the context of this supposedly out-of-school space. Jane Austen, Chuck Palahniuk, Ayn Rand, Brett Easton Ellis, Anthony Burgess, Jeffrey Eugenides, and Victor Hugo are just some of the traditionally canonical or “academic” writers that participants introduced into conversations throughout the workshop. This points to the way boundaries dissolved in this context—the division between the workshop and school seemed lessened because there was no stigma attached to knowledge based on its discursive origin.

During one of the final workshop sessions, Sofia explained why she chose Tupac as a

hero for her main character, Esperanza. In summary of Sofia's points, Esperanza adores Tupac's music, but she is more than a fan. For her, his songs, his life story, and the legends about him transcend simple fandom; they become a source of faith and inspiration. One might liken this to the way religious texts function in the lives of the faithful. In Esperanza's eyes, Tupac is a symbol of perseverance and transcendence, and she refuses to believe that he is dead because she can't accept that the contradictions between his gangsta and activist personas caused his death. Because her life features similar contradictory impulses, Esperanza's recognition of Tupac's death means giving up on her own redemption.

Sofia:

[*Laughs.*] She's obsessed with Tupac Shakur and the reason why I chose Tupac as this icon is because—

Kaia:

—And that's the title too, that's the song—

Sofia:

—Right, and so *Picture Me Rollin'*, and that's a song that he created, um that he recorded when he got out of jail. Right, the whole opening line is Picture Me Rollin' in my Benz, like I'm out—and at the end of the song he's, he is, you know...yelling fuck you to everybody in the prison system. [*Raising arm and pointing*] YOU corrections officer, YOU the warden, YOU the judge, fuck you [*raises hand with middle finger*]! Picture me rollin'! [*Whips raised fist around in a circle then bends arm with pointed finger from side to side like a windshield wiper.*] That's what the whole song is about, right? So that's why I named the book *Picture Me Rollin'* cause she wants to be rollin' but that's easier said than done, right? She might be out but she ain't exactly, you know livin' large, right, so, um...

[...]

Sofia:

He's out in Cuba using an old turn—an old Technics—somebody got him some old Technics turntables and he's still—he's in a old—it may not be the most advanced equipment because it's Cuba, but he's there with some old, maybe with an old 808 or somethin', and he's still making records! No, part of it is because he's so prolific and my friend has a very good theory about this, she's like, why do people accept that Biggie is gone but they can't accept that Tupac is gone. Her theory is that with Biggie people got to say goodbye.

Jalisa:

That's true.

Sofia:

They got to say goodbye, they they they, you know, they carried his casket through the streets of Brooklyn—

Jalisa:

Yeah, you know, he had a funeral...

Sofia:

—and so people got some...closure, whereas with Tupac, you know there was never a public thing you know there was never sort of, you know—was he cremated? I don't think he was cremated. I think he was buried. Everything just was really, really—you know, and also it wasn't until much later that like, for example, they released like his autopsy photos. Um, so they were being very secretive around, like his coronary [*sic*], or whatever...so, you know, that like, fed people's—you know, because before then, you know, he had been like the...the Teflon don, until then and he survived!

Kaia:

Five times! Five!

[...]

Kaia:

If I just saw Tupac walkin' down the street I would...

Jalisa:

Word.

Sofia:

But I just think that he has...I think, that beyond the fact that people were not able to mourn him—

Kaia:

It's the message that he had.

Sofia:

I think it's because of what he stood for.

Jalisa:

Yeah.

Sofia:

There was...as much as with the whole book I grapple with the notion of revolutionary but gangster, if there was someone who could be that, it was him.

Kaia:

Right.

Jalisa:

Right.

Sofia:

And I think that he exhibited so much promise that wasn't fulfilled and that's exactly why I use him as an icon in this novel. Because Tupac had two [*raises fists and lifts elbows push fists together*] contradictory impulses. There was the thug and there was the revolutionary.

Kaia:

You think they were contradictory?

Sofia:

Well, maybe thug is not the right word because you know, there's a way that—maybe thug is not the right word. Um...maybe gangsta is the word. Cause right, cause, whatcha thuggin' about, right? It's like what motivates yo thug, right? [*Laughs.*] So, you could be a thug for justice [*raises fist into the air*] in a certain way, right? [*Laughs.*] But some people would argue that, so let's say gangsta, let's say—or maybe gangsta is the right word, and again we have all these words that are nuanced, right? They have...and they, we...and remember we talked about last week, we talked about words having different meanings and different contexts and it shapes what they mean over time. So, but the point is that he had these...there was a way that he was very identified with the folks who, you know, were in communities, you know who were preying on their own folk and communities. But at the same time, he also identified with the folks who were very much about standing up for their communities and championing their communities. My belief is like his inability to reconcile those two [*raises fists and lifts elbows push fists together*] contradictory impulses is what led to his death, that's my argument. That's how I feel.

Kaia:

I think it's the cops who led to his death. [*Laughs.*]

Sofia:

Well, I mean, yeah...and when you start looking at the context he's working in, right? We all have contradictions, but he's also a highly contradictory public figure. Meaning a lot of things to a lot of people, both good and bad, and...um, so, the reason why I used him as an icon in this story is that Esperanza relates to those contradictions. There's a part of her that really has this impulse to want to

do good and live a life of meaning and do positive things and add value into the world, right? But there's a part of her that given her—you talked about well, there's the cops and that was because of the cops that were part of that—well, when you look at her circumstances, right, and her socialization and how she was raised and what she was taught to value, um...the kind of things she wants, her good impulses—you know, she has these other impulses that I wanna get paid. By any means necessary. And if that means—

Jalisa:

She sounds like me!

Sofia:

—And if that means engaging in certain things and dealing with certain people...then that's what that means.

Jalisa:

Yeah.

Sofia:

Right? So for me, that's why Esperanza has to believe that Tupac is alive. She has to believe that somehow he transcended his contradictions. That even though he had these contradictions, he still survived. His contradictions didn't kill him. Not being able to work them out didn't have deadly results.

Kaia:

This world has so many contradictions.

Many literary and philosophical underpinnings gird this conversation. Though Sofia did most of the talking during this exchange, participants needed to follow her logic, and their physical and verbal responses show that they were meaningfully engaged in the content and message she offered. I was struck by the seriousness and care with which the group discussed Tupac. Sofia positions participants as experts who understand Tupac as a complex symbol of both resistance and material success. Interestingly, some of her ideas trace back to other texts: Tupac's music videos, his songs, websites filled with conspiracy theories about his death, autopsy photos, newspaper/magazine articles, and even popular biographies such as the film *Thug Angel* (2002). Knowing Sofia's love for Tupac, she undoubtedly drew upon sources like

these when she wrote her novel. While there is no obvious academic text mentioned in this discussion, the group analyzes Tupac like a literary figure. The narrative of his life rendered in symbolic terms, and the discussion requires a background knowledge of the conventions of literary and philosophical thinking. Indeed, the knowledge one must bring to this conversation goes well beyond information about Tupac; it requires an understanding of the historical, social, cultural and political forces that acted upon his life and that of Esperanza.

Blending of registers. At the level of word choice and style, participants in the workshop blended many different registers as part of their exchanges. As participants shifted among various vernaculars and registers from sentence to sentence or phrase to phrase, they signaled the many selves they brought to each moment of their conversations. Take, for example, Kaia, who prefaced a reading of one of her original compositions with “I’m gon’ spit it.” This comment signaled a slam or rap stance in relationship to her writing and her public presentation of it. Using this phrase as an introduction caused me to expect her to perform her writing according to slam poetry conventions, but instead, she shifted into a completely different tone to read her short story. In her typical interactions with others in the workshop, she used the diction and stylization one might expect from a slam poet. Slam poets traditionally carry a critical position in relationship to the world around them, as the themes in their work often highlight issues of injustice or call for greater equity in society (Fisher, 2003). Kaia often brought these types of perspectives to the class discussions, grounding her comments in a particular sociopolitical orientation which is consistent with her slam poet identity. I can only guess at why she chose to shift her tone when reading her short story, but the significance of the change highlights a semiotic intention on her part.

Sofia set up the pattern of blending registers, cueing students to the possibility of this type of linguistic juxtaposition as a feature of this community's discourse. In the following example drawn from the group's discussion of Tupac's death, she artfully wove discourses together to make meaning.

Sofia:

Well, maybe thug is not the right word because you know, there's a way that—maybe thug is not the right word. Um...maybe gangsta is the word. 'Cause right, 'cause, whatcha thuggin' about, right? It's like what motivates yo thug, right? [*Laughs.*] So, you could be a thug for justice [*raises fist into the air*] in a certain way, right? [*Laughs.*] But some people would argue that, so let's say gangsta, let's say—or maybe gangsta is the right word, and again we have all these words that are nuanced, right? They have...and they, we...and remember we talked about last week, we talked about words having different meanings and different contexts and it shapes what they mean over time. So, but the point is that he had these...there was a way that he was very identified with the folks who, you know, were in communities, you know who were preying on their own folk and communities. But at the same time, he also identified with the folks who were very much about standing up for their communities and championing their communities. My belief is like his inability to reconcile those two [*raises fists and lifts elbows push fists together*] contradictory impulses is what led to his death, that's my argument. That's how I feel.

Sofia shifts from hip-hop-oriented vocabulary in the beginning of her discourse, then she blends in a more formal set of words when she begins to consider the language best suited to describing Tupac's contradictions. She makes a similar transition when, in talking about the relationship between her two characters, Espy and Jesus in a fairly formal way, she shifts registers saying Jesus "loves her [Espy] *down*." This change may stem partially from her desire to use a language more consistent with Jesus's character, but it also serves another purpose. The co-mingling of registers is subtle but it has powerful implications. The more formal register is usually associated with "standard" English, and this dialect is usually held in higher regard in social institutions such as schools. By blending vocabularies, Sofia opens up a possibility for the

use of any register best suited to one's communication goals, regardless of the prestige or stigma that may be attached to it in other contexts.

Participants in this workshop carry a plethora of subjectivities to their shared experiences. They made astute decisions about how to utilize these elements to make meaning. I was not surprised to see the use of English vernaculars in an out-of-school setting; the dynamics influencing language use such as institutional norms, relationships of participants, and social power structures are quite different in a space like this than they are in the classroom. However, participants invoked vernaculars with skill, purpose and intention that bore the mark of linguistic craftsmanship.

Linguistic savvy and respect for dynamic language(s). In addition to the covert perspectives that emerged in their discourse, overtly articulated some thoughts on language in one conversation. Sofia designed an activity to get participants thinking about the language choices they might make for their characters. She asked them to think about ways of saying everyday phrases such as “hello,” “goodbye,” or “that’s my friend” in ways that suggest temporal or cultural location. I have redacted a significant portion of the conversation, but this interaction still shows a keen understanding of the dynamic nature of language.

John:

The phrases, like, I feel like they are inter-generational.

Sofia:

Uh-m. [*Nods.*]

Sofia:

Some people still use “What’s cookin’?” Maybe not often, but if you say it, people know what you’re talking about. Even if they don’t use it and you say it.

Lucy:
Or “bounce.”

Sofia:
Ok, that’s goodbye. Let’s do some goodbyes: [*writing it down*] bounce.

Tina:
Peace.

Sofia:
Peace.

John:
Peace can be hello or goodbye.

Sofia:
I’m Audi.

Joe:
Five thousand. [*Laughs.*]

Sofia:
Five thousand. [*Writes that down too.*]

[...]

Lucy:
Later.

Sofia:
Later. [*Writes it down.*] With an S?

Joe:
Sometimes people say, “I’m about to dip.”

Gilberto:
Sounds like haters.

Tracy:
Dip is right now, though, right?

Sofia:
[*Writing*] “I’m about to dip” is current?

Tina:

Yeah.

[...]

Sofia:

What about some older slang terms for leaving?

[...]

Lucy:

Toodles.

Sofia:

[Laughs and writes it down.]

Joe:

PEACE. PEACE. PEACE.

Tina:

I feel like a lot of these things aren't even, like, they aren't, like, defined by time, but they're more so associated with culture.

Sofia:

Uh-hum. Like "toodles" and "top of the morning" probably.

Lucy:

And dialect so they change, like, with—the ones you use depend on who you're speaking to, and the setting and context. So you wouldn't be in a job interview and be like yo gimme the job, son!

John:

Yeah.

Sofia:

[As she punches the air and laughs] Give me the job, son! *[Still laughing]* Like, you know, like... *[Laughs]*

Sofia:

You're probably not going to get it unless, you know... So, that's hello *[flips to a new sheet]*. Here's the next one. Again, we'll start with what's current, and we'll see if we can work our way back. The next one is, you want to say this is quite simply *[writes on the flipboard]*, "She's...my...good...friend."

Lucy:

That's my homegirl.

Sofia:

[*Writing*] That's my girl.

John:

That's my home skillet, biscuit.

Several people:

Ooohhh... [*Laughing*]

Sofia:

You all still say skillet? 'Cause that's from MY time [*pointing at herself*].

Tina:

Home skillet?

Sofia:

Y'all still say skillet?

Several people:

Yeah...

Sofia:

Skillet has LASTed. WAH-ow.

Joe:

That's because, it only lasted because of that show, *Raymond*.

Sofia:

I mean when I was coming up it was home EVerything.

Tina:

I didn't even watch that show.

Sofia:

It started off as HOME BOY.....HOME GIRL. But then it became HOME SKILlet, HOME DOG, HOME—I mean I had a Dominican kid say HOME DELIQUEQUE. Which is like...CAKE.

[*General whoahs, wows, laughter.*]

Sofia:

[*Laughs*] HOME Deliqueque.

Lucy:

Home SLICE.

Sofia:

[*Points at glasses and nods.*] Home slice.

Tina:

Home slice.

Sofia:

That's what we were doing: we were riffing on home slice, and home slice became a LOT [*spreads arms*] of different things. HOME DELIQUEQUE. HOME FLAN.

Sofia:

And HOME everything. [*Laughs*] Home slice, went, became all these other things.

Gilberto:

Um...bestie.

Sofia:

Bestie. [*Writing.*]

Joe:

Chick.

Sofia:

Chick.

Lucy:

Bitch. That's my bitch. [*Laughs.*]

Sofia:

SHAWty. As well as shorty.

Lucy:

Bitch. [*A little softer*] That's, that's my bitch.

Sofia:

Some people do. Some people do say that, yeah [*writes "bitch" down*].

Tina:

Are you avoiding the obvious one? [*Then turns back to her food.*]

Joe:

That's my nigga.

[*Sofia writes it down.*]

Tina:

I'm just saying. I don't think it should be danced around.

Sofia:

That's real, right? [*Pointing at "nigga" with her marker*] I spelled it right, right?

That's, that's what the A was for.

Lucy:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[*General laughter.*]

Participants partnered with Sofia to find words that show positionality. Early in the conversation, John recognized the temporal aspect of certain words and phrases, acknowledging that some words move forward in time across generations while others do not. Tina noted that culture influences one's word choices in the situations Sofia raises. Lucy makes another important contribution when she highlighted the way context and purpose shape one's language choices. Sofia and Lucy show the way language can evolve (from homeboy, to homeslice, to home-deli-queue) across contexts, cultures, and identities. Finally, in their discussion of the phrases "that's my bitch" and "that's my nigga," Sofia, Joe, Lucy and Tina demonstrate their awareness of the social, historical, and political aspects of language.

Metacognitive conversations about the properties of language and its ability to reflect, style, and (re)create the world around us represent a fulfillment of what the New London Group called "critical framing." Critical framing "help[s] learners frame their growing mastery...and conscious control and understanding in relation to historical, social, cultural, political, ideological, and value-centered relations of particular systems of knowledge and social practice" (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee et al., 1996, p. 86). When Sofia facilitated this conversation

about language, she urged participants toward a “metalinguistic awareness” through sociocultural analyses of speech (Alim, 2007) while simultaneously making way for plurality in language usage. She cultivates participants’ sense of fluctuating languages that shift across time, space, and context. Sofia’s activity nudges youth toward a critical stance in relationship to words, underscoring their power as writers and meaning-makers to shape their worlds (both fictional and real).

Conclusions. During the study, I observed youth discussing nuanced and multivalent interpretations of and responses to street fiction texts and characters. They easily adopted a critical stance in relationship to the texts; they were aware of what they enjoyed *and* what they questioned. Sofia gave participants the freedom to meet the texts on their own terms and with their own objectives. Multiple languages (including various English vernaculars) invoked by participants during the workshop showed that youth were free to self-monitor and select the words in verbal or written communications that best served their intended meanings. The participants eagerly discussed issues of craft, characterization, authenticity of representations urban lives, and social and political ethos directly with a street fiction author. In their discussions, participants showed street fiction was a *part* of youth’s reading regimes but did not completely dominate them. They invoked identities, discourses, texts, and bodies of knowledge from several other areas showing the fluidity and complexity of their readings and responses to street fiction.

I do not suggest that all street fiction readers approach the novels the way the participants in this study did. They were clearly in a privileged setting for the express purpose of being critical, mindful readers and writers. However it does show that this type of interaction with

street fiction texts *can* occur if the conditions are right. The discussions from the workshop push back against some of the narratives that cast street fiction as “dangerous” in the hands of its “vulnerable” readers. Furthermore, the conversations here resist the characterization of street fiction as being devoid of anything except for sex, violence and drugs. The rich conversations participants had would not have been possible if the text, with all of its relationships to the social, political, historical and literary world, did not fuel them.

The conversations I described in this chapter inform the recontextualization of the street fiction genre and the critical discourse analysis of street fiction novels I conduct in the remainder of this study. “Textual analysis is only part of semiotic analysis” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 237), so I juxtapose the perspectives of the youth who participated in the workshop with an analysis of the texts, contexts and author assertions that frame the genre. I believe the conversation of these intertexts will deepen understandings drawn from this work, guiding me to implications that may ultimately contribute to a more accurate, equitable view of the genre.

Research Rationale and Overview

Popular culture like street fiction can either be a bridge or a battleground in the relationship between teachers and students and in students’ in- and out-of-school literacies. Just as it is unrealistic for teachers to think they can completely insulate their students from youth culture, it is equally unrealistic for them to expect to bar it from their classrooms. Like it or not, street fiction *is* in the classroom every day—students carry it with them as part of their reading lives. Though it is not always a direct representation of the lives of the youth who read it, street fiction links with its readers’ identities, representing notions of race, class, gender and social location in complex ways. Condemning readers’ choices vis-à-vis street fiction is a dead end.

Uncovering the rich relationships between readers of the genre and texts might offer powerful theoretical, practical and pedagogical insights, particularly for English teachers interested in helping students make full use of all literacy assets available to them. As such, the literacy practice of reading street fiction has possibilities and implications that merit scholarly attention.

During the course of this study, I offer insights related to the following research questions:

1. How do spheres of influence from history, popular cultures and literatures converge to shape street fiction?
2. What recurring tropes, themes, discourses and identities figure into street fiction novels, and taken together, what kind of worldview do they represent?
3. How might an improved understanding of the contexts and content of street fiction make for rich pedagogical experiences with the genre?

In chapter two, I begin recontextualizing street fiction along historical, cultural and social lines, mapping the spheres of influence that shape the genre. Specifically, I explore the theoretical and cultural links between street fiction and African American literary theories, early American sentimental novels and other popular American fiction, and hip-hop. Using theories from W.E.B. DuBois and Mikhail Bakhtin, I explain how seeing street fiction through the lenses of *double consciousness* and *heteroglossia* helps account for the tensions and contradictions in street fiction novels. I argue that street fiction fits within the field of the American sentimental novel, and I think about what these connections mean for the democratization of literary spaces. Since hip-hop figures so prominently in street fiction, I examine the stylistic and thematic elements they share. I consider some of the features of street fiction, and show how various markers used in the texts expose and cultivate identities, positionalities, and worldviews. In my

exploration of these topics, I also present the conceptual framework that informs the study, including a discussion of critical literacies, resistance theory, and popular culture studies.

Chapter three focuses on the methodologies used in this study. Here, I explain the critical discourse analysis and cultural studies frameworks I used to structure this exploration of street fiction. To increase transparency, I explain key decisions I made during the research, including the method of textual selections. In addition, I include a discussion of my position in relationship to the subject matter and the limitations of this work.

I apply some the theories and influences mapped in chapter two to four examples of street fiction texts in chapter four. I trace three key contradictory themes through the four novels: 1) ambivalence as a way of making space for to resist dominant ideologies, 2) the construction of selfhood and otherness in the novels as a potential reconsideration of damaging stereotypes of people most affected by urban relegation, and 3) the complex relationship between real and fantastic elements in the genre that can simultaneously reflect and redefine the world. As I attend to the many powerful possibilities with street fiction, I also consider the problematic representations in the novels that may undermine its potential to encourage transformative literacies.

Chapter five details the implications for education that may be extrapolated from this study of street fiction. Whether or not educators use street fiction texts in their classrooms, they can draw important ideas, questions and understandings by considering the contexts, relationships, and themes surrounding the genre. Here, I will discuss some of the new directions I observe emerging from street fiction. I offer some preliminary considerations for educators who want to explore street fiction's connections to several timeless issues in English education, such as the nature of literariness, the ideal relationships between reading and writing, the purpose of fiction

in people's lives, and the book as both cultural artifact and commodity.

Chapter Two: Toward a Recontextualization of Street Fiction

Many critics seem to treat street fiction as an isolated, culturally impoverished genre—a pitiable or perhaps opportunistic mimicry of canonical literature. In fact, street fiction is a literary and cultural phenomenon that springs from old and deep roots across media. Scholars have yet to devote much attention to the multiple spheres of influence that inform the genre. Morris (2012) traces a lineage of gritty, urban stories in American fiction going all the way back to Stephen Crane's 1893 novella *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, yet much more can be said about the forces that shape the genre since an urban setting and “grit” are not the only characteristics that make a book street fiction. Morris's desire to trace street fiction back to its literary origins is valiant given that so many of its critics appear to ignore its cultural connections, but I suggest that instead of trying to project the terms “street fiction” or “urban fiction” backward in literary history, it is more advantageous to flesh out the cultural linkages that define the genre at present. I argue that to understand the genre on its own terms, one must look at the cultural spheres of influence that overtly (or subconsciously) shape the reading and writing practices associated with it.

Thinking about the spheres of influence in his novels, acclaimed African-American novelist Ralph Ellison wrote that he had both “ancestors,” who he chose to inspire his writing and “relatives,” whose work he admired but he did not draw from to create his art (Gates, 1988, p. 121; Rice, 2007, p. 77). Ellison created this distinction to emphasize the creative control he had over his work, and the delineation also serves the purpose of emphasizing that works by two authors who share a particular identity such as race are not necessarily cultural bedfellows.

Informed by this perspective, I offer a preliminary map of some of street fiction's ancestors or spheres of influence as I see them; where authors merge elements from American literary traditions such as noir fiction, African-American literature, American pulp fiction, and early sentimental American novels. Given that street fiction was born in the age of multimedia, it is also important to include a discussion of the influence the sights, sounds and worldview cultivated by hip hop have had on the genre. While it remains a rich area for future study, I have not addressed the connections between street fiction and the "blaxploitation" movies of the 1970s and New Black Realism films of the 1990s. Setting these spheres of influence aside temporarily allowed me to maintain a more specific focus on textual links during this inquiry.

Depending on many factors including the structure, style, and content of the street fiction novel selected for analysis, other researchers may notice additional spheres of influence that I have not included here. My list is by no means exhaustive. But I include the aforementioned spheres since I find them to be them to have a broad relevance to the genre. Notably, each of these spheres of influence makes the landscape of street fiction more fertile stylistically and ideologically; street fiction is not a direct derivation of any single one of them. Before I begin a discussion of how each of the spheres shapes this body of writing, it is worth taking a step back to think about the meaning of the novel as a *genre* in relationship to street fiction. To do this, I must treat street fiction as "literature" in the sense that is undoubtedly part of a body of written and/or verbal art (Scholes, Phelan, & Kellogg, 1966).

Why the Novel?

I see it as no accident that the preferred genre of street fiction is the novel. Novels bring the reader close to the subject, which is part of what creates the gritty or raw sensibility in street

fiction. As Mikhail Bakhtin notes in his extensive description of the genre, the novel is consumed with the everyday lives of people (1981). The novel is preoccupied with the familiar, the quotidian; this is reflected in the language, the characters, the setting and plot. This characteristic is especially fitting for street fiction since its narratives remain tightly focused on exploring (in both realistic and fantastic ways) urban life for Black and brown people living in historically underserved communities. In street fiction, we see all-too-familiar modern urban social perils, such as drug dealing, poverty, physical and/or sexual abuse of women and children, shaping characters' lives grounded in contemporary representations of the "ghetto" or the "hood." Often, street fiction also shows romantic relationships, friendships, home life, house parties—the small stuff of some Black and brown urban lives. Dialogue in street fiction is predominantly written in African-American vernacular English (AAVE) as it is taken up by urban youth culture, satisfying Bakhtin's assertion that novels are written in "unofficial" or informal language (Bakhtin, 1981, p.19).

Like other novelists, street fiction authors incorporate multiple discourses, languages, voices and textual forms into their narratives. Diary entries, legal language or correspondence, letters, resumes, movie dialogue, song lyrics, literary theory, and language or ideology from political movements are just a few examples of the genres and discourses that crop up in street fiction texts I have read. Characters also appear to alter their speech frequently: they speak to parole officers and grandmothers differently than they do to their friends, and they may also speak languages other than English when the occasion calls for it. In *Picture Me Rollin'* Esperanza weaves Spanish words and phrases into her conversations with her sister and her friends, reflecting her Afro-Latina culture. For Bakhtin, the originality of the novel rests largely part on the plurality of discourses afforded by the genre. He explains that the novel as a genre

was born in a polyglot moment when discourses and languages became aware of both one another and the relationships that link them. The novel's hybrid form allows authors to incorporate many kinds of texts (songs, letters, legal writing, forms, contracts, poems, etc.) into the narrative. He suggests that the hybrid nature of the novel makes space for the presence and interactions of multiple discourses—many voices relating to one another in various ways. This hybridity opens up the possibility for *heteroglossia*, one of Bakhtin's most important theories from a poststructuralist standpoint. He writes:

Heteroglossia...is another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author...And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they—as it were—know each other and are structured in this mutual knowledge of each other; it is as if they actually hold a conversation with one another...A potential dialogue is embedded in them, one as yet unfolded, a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 325)

In other words, in the novel's world of discourse, the author's ideas, worldview and intentions do not just coexist with those of the characters; they dialogically engage with them. In the spaces between the author's world of discourse and that of the characters, there is a hidden ongoing conversation.

While I agree that the concept of *heteroglossia* is a fundamentally important feature of novels in general and of street fiction in particular, this concept alone does not fully describe the doubling that occurs in this genre. A cognitive dissonance can arise from hearing two voices, particularly when they contradict one another. The worlds of street fiction are ruled by these contradictions. Characters navigate competing messages regarding legality and morality, self-definition and the identities assigned to them by society, and they do so in a world where White supremacy has infiltrated every aspect of the world around them—from education, to criminal

justice, to employment and housing. In light of this, I find it helpful to temper street fiction's *heteroglossia* with W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness" (1903). Though Bakhtin celebrates the multiple discourses at work in the novel's *heteroglossia*, Du Bois describes a doubling in the African-American consciousness that is fraught with tension. He writes:

"...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder"

(Du Bois, 1903, p.38). Though Du Bois does not write about the novel in particular here, his work has been applied to studies of African-American literary productions time and again (Gates, 1989; Dickson, 1992; Adell, 1994). The two-fold nature of Black consciousness or self-awareness in Du Bois' work shows the negative side of engaging multiple discourses simultaneously, whereas Bakhtin only marks the positive aspects of his *heteroglossia*, Du Bois describes the struggle of maintaining a double consciousness in the "dark body," which has been a site of fascination and paranoia in American culture since the time of slavery. In street fiction stories, characters' bodies always merit description, though the rest of the tale focuses on fast-paced action. Black and brown bodies, often described part by part, figure prominently in scenes of sexuality and violence in the narratives. In street fiction, it is worth considering how the raced, classed, and gendered body set against the backdrop of the urban American street becomes a place where multiple discourses intersect.

Taken together, Bakhtin's *heteroglossia* and Du Bois' *double consciousness* provide the tools to unpack multiple discourses in street fiction in cases where the implied multivalent dialogues alternate between accord and discord. Without Du Bois' implication that power (whether it is informed by social hierarchies, economic inequities, racial identities, or other dynamics) shapes the dialogic relationships of discourses in novels, *heteroglossia* cannot entirely capture the refractions that occur in street fiction on its own. Putting *heteroglossia* in conversation with *double consciousness* opens new possibilities in reading street fiction. It means that readers of the genre need not choose between purely positive or negative readings of the text; the discourses that occur there can contradict, affirm, disrupt, or reinforce one another freely.

For example, critics of street fiction accuse its authors of repeating stereotypical, flat, dehumanizing stories and characters which are sensationalized versions of the people who do face real social issues connected to poverty and institutional racism as part of their daily lives. As Tracey Michael Lewis, an author and a writing and literature teacher at Community College of Philadelphia and Philadelphia University said: "To some extent, [in street fiction] there is an exposure to a part of urban culture that has rarely been explored in a way that it is now...which can be a starting point for civic dialogues...Unfortunately, we have to ask ourselves, 'What is this costing us?'" (Rice, 2009). The question is valid if one evaluates street fictions only in terms of its risks and rewards. While it is true that street fiction authors often return to hustlers, drug dealers, and gangsters as protagonists, they do not all portray these characters in the same light across all representations. In *Dirty Red* by Vickie Stringer, for instance, we meet Red, the female protagonist who hustles men for money, property, clothing and goods befitting her luxurious lifestyle (Stringer, 2006). She takes a Machiavellian view of all of her friendships and sexual relationships, and has little regard for others. Initially, the reader seems meant to admire her cold,

calculating demeanor. Yet her personality takes on more complex dimension when, midway through the novel, readers learn that her mother's boyfriend sexually abused her at a young age. Suddenly her strengths are no longer seem to be a source of pride; they are construed as defense mechanism for something broken in her past, and the luster of her hustle is cast in an ambiguous, if not sad, light. Red aspires to start a new life in a legitimate business, but she is torn between her past habits and her future aspirations. Red is in a state of becoming—and the tensions surrounding the multiple possibilities of who she will be are part of what compels readers forward through the narrative. Filtered through Du Bois and Bakhtin, I begin to wonder less about the “cost” of a character like Red and more about the complications of her—does her past abuse excuse her ruthlessness? Is her success at manipulating others a coping mechanism or the mark of having overcome her past? Would Red, the author, and I answer these questions in the same way, or would we come to different conclusions? The many voices in the texts make for interesting dialogue about this body of writing.

In discussing *heteroglossia* and *double-voicedness* in street fiction, I would be remiss if I did not include a remark about the publishers' voices since a shift is happening now. In the late 1990s, street fiction was predominantly self-published by its authors or brought to market by small, local publishing houses. Street fiction author K'wan Foye, who has been writing in the genre since the early 2000s, commented on the unwillingness of major publishing houses to print his first novel, *Gangsta* (2002), providing the impetus for him to turn to toward an independent publisher focused on street fiction to disseminate his work.

And when I got my first hit, I was not really looking for public consumption from it out of the gate. I was just kind of doing it as a therapy for myself. What I was hearing from the publishers at the time is that there was no market for Street Fiction or the kind of story that I was telling. They would kind of look at me like I was from Mars and say, “You can't sell this? What is this? This is trash? No, nobody wants to read about this.”

That was a good amount of years ago though, maybe 2001 before all the stuff started rolling. Vicky [sic] [Stringer] was starting a publishing house called Triple Crown [Publications], and she asked me to be the first author. I was like, all right, cool. I'd be the first author on Triple Crown, rather than go to another publishing house and try to compete with a spot on the roster. I was still apprehensive about trying to be published, but it took off like a bat out of hell. (Lewis, 2012)

In other words, when Foye began his career, insiders within the communities referenced in the books were the ones handling representations of the characters. Today, large publishing houses like Simon & Schuster, Penguin Random House, and St. Martin's Press, which are dominated by White middle- or upper- class editors and executives, are deciding what stories to tell about "'hood" life.

Simon & Schuster, for instance, markets the novels of Wahida Clark, Iceberg Slim, and Ashley & JaQuavis Coleman under their Cash Money Content imprint. According to the Lee & Low Diversity Baseline Survey (2015), based on data collected from 42 publishers of various types and sizes in North America, 86% of executives were White, 59% were women. Among editorial staff, 82% were White and 84% were women. Though class data was not included in this survey, liberal arts college degrees are required for most editorial and executive positions, and these colleges tend to be dominated by White, middle or upper class students (Lee, 2016).

The exclusion of street fiction from traditional publishing houses in the 2000s may have frustrated authors, but it did keep control of the representations of street life in the hands of authors and independent booksellers who were much closer to the communities portrayed in the novels. Now, independent street fiction publishers such as Vickie Stringer of Triple Crown Publications see the power shifting to mainstream publication. She comments: "America was designed for the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer. And that's the travesty of publishing. It was one of the last of the free hustles. It was limitless in what you said, in your

earnings, your word, to your audience, delivered the way you wanted to give it to them.

Publishing was the last chance to have control. Now Amazon is controlling everything because they control the distribution. Publishing to me has turned into a travesty because no indie publisher can offer what Triple Crown Publishing could do. I can't take you from A to Z anymore" (Thomas, 2016).

The White, middle/ upper-class voices of the publishers will invariably shape discourses at work in street fiction, but they are much harder to detect while reading. Readers will never know if a plot twist or character trait originated with the author or with the publisher (who may care more about profit than authenticity). The unwritten rules of the genre demand that the characters' stories, no matter how fantastic, are grounded in lived experiences or authentic knowledge of the street. Online bookstore owner Constance Shabazz sums up the problem, saying: "...[the White, middle/upper-class dominated White publishers] are trying to define who we are and what we like. I personally know of some excellent writers who lost major contracts with publishers because they did not write urban lit. It's as if they couldn't support more than one genre that African Americans read at one time" (Rice, 2009). It remains to be seen whether the hand of major publishing outfits in street fiction will give authors more latitude and support in crafting original stories, or whether it will co-opt the genre with an emphasis on profit.

Street Fiction and the Tradition of Popular American Novels

An ahistorical view of street fiction prevents scholars from considering just how true to the tradition of the American novel the genre is. It is easy to forget that many classic American texts were popular in their day, and others were contested. *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) by John Steinbeck was an immediate bestseller, but it was also branded obscene and burned in the streets

(Wartzman, 2008). Herman Melville, who has a spot on nearly every list of “great American literature” died in relative anonymity, and *Moby Dick* (1851) received very little attention until the 1930s when critics began to praise him for tapping into the American consciousness with his images of the great white whale (Lauter, 1994). James Fennimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) is celebrated for its depictions of pioneering hearts of early Americans, yet his contemporary critics such as Mark Twain mocked the book’s sentimentality and problematic plot (Twain, 1895). Literary scholars today often temper any praise of the book with substantial critiques of the essentialist representations of Native American characters in the novel (Robinson, 1991). These examples merely illustrate that the boundaries sometimes attributed to the world of the written word; sacred–profane, popular–literary, high and low; depend far more on the political, social, and historical position(s) of the people drawing them than any discrete divisions; they are always in flux. Rather than viewing street fiction as a derivative aberration in the landscape of American letters, I argue that street fiction fits perfectly well into the movement of fiction across boundaries and labels of high and low culture and from the world of the popular to that of “literature.” Furthermore, the controversies surrounding street fiction are nothing new; in many ways, the same old questions have been asked time and again whenever a new margin of writing presses against hegemonic definitions of literature.

With little of the prestige awarded to contemporary novelists, the first American novelists of the late 1700s and early 1800s told little stories about the grit of present-day lives, rather than expounding on the wonders of distant, glorious worlds of by-gone eras associated with the “epic past” (Bakhtin, 1981, p.18). Novels such as *The Coquette* (1797) by Hannah Webster Foster, *Weiland* (1798) by Charles Brockden Brown, and *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) by William Hill Brown centered on tragedy in the lives of ordinary White women. In the plots of these

stories, ordinary women are seduced by men who alter the promising trajectories of their young lives, and in some cases, even cause their deaths (Stern, 2008). Audiences were mainly to middle- or lower-class White women who were excluded from the grandeur and promise of the Enlightenment-era discourse of liberty proffered by men like Thomas Jefferson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The early American novels, with their gothic and sentimental sensibilities, made an emotional spectacle of lives of people rendered invisible by the new republic. As Julia Stern (2008) observes, early American fiction: "...suggests that the foundation of the republic is in fact a crypt, that the nation's non-citizens—women, the poor, Native Americans, African Americans, and aliens—lie socially dead and inadequately buried, the casualties of post-Revolutionary political foreclosure. These invisible Americans, prematurely interred beneath the great national edifice whose erection they actually enable, provide an unquiet platform for the construction of Republican privilege, disturbing the Federalist monolith in powerful ways" (p. 2). As Stern's comments show, the tradition of using literature as a space to qualify and critique the promises of the "American Dream" are as old as the Republic itself. Here, I would like to outline some important parallels between street fiction and early American novels to illustrate how writers of this relatively new genre participate in this conversation, and to show how the tensions surrounding street fiction are woven into the heart and soul of American literature.

At the beginning of America's literary history, "novel" was a dirty word. In the late 18th and early 19th century, authors who were, in fact, novelists maligned the label because it was associated with "low" forms of writing, sentimentality, and corruption (Davidson, 1986; Stern 2008). Writers resisted using the term in reference to their own work, using the prefaces of their novels to extol the moral and pedagogical nature of their texts in comparison to other popular works of fiction (Davidson, 1986). In the preface to *The Power of Sympathy*, for instance,

William Hill Brown spins the corrupting forces at work in his narrative by offering a statement insisting on his positive intentions. He writes: “These volumes [are intended to] represent the specious Causes, and to Expose the fatal Consequences of Seduction; to inspire the Female Mind With a Principle of Self Complacency, and to Promote the Economy of Human Life” (Davidson, 1986, p. 46). In today’s language, this might be rephrased: “this book will teach young women to avoid being seduced so that society does not have to face the problem of numerous children born out of wedlock.”

If this dynamic of disavowing one’s creative work of unappealing labels sounds familiar vis-à-vis street fiction authors, it should. Several authors who have had the street fiction label applied to their work have pushed back against the label, distancing themselves from the genre. Sister Souljah and Omar Tyree are two notable examples. In a 2007 interview, Tyree explains his resistance to the label “urban fiction”:

Initially I didn’t have a problem with that label...I feel it’s okay as long as we have a balance with other stories being told dealing with other aspects of African American culture. But once something becomes popular and profitable, people start going toward that avenue to make capital. Now it seems if you don’t write urban or street no one wants to read your material...Right now I am looking for us to break out of that stage, to start writing about our community from other aspects than what’s already out there...I would call myself an issue writer. I came out with a book called *Leslie* which was about New Orleans poverty in 2002 way before the Katrina tragedies. Back then reviewers didn’t want to deal with what I was writing, but now everyone is talking about it. I’m writing on a three dimensional level. I am way past a girl visiting a guy in jail. I am dealing with family, education, and generational stuff; the politics of humanity. (Watkins, 2007)

Tyree’s rejects characterizations of his writing as a commodity meant for thoughtless mass consumption, which he sees as a key characteristic of street fiction. He differentiates his work from that of street fiction writers due to the pedagogical value he feels is lacking in the genre. Furthermore, Tyree highlights the problematic argument street fiction authors seem repeatedly required to make to defend the humanity in their stories, while cautioning readers

away from essentializing all Black urban people based on a handful of characters in a few novels. It is as if street fiction authors must continue to assert that though their stories hinge on localized, particular, raced, classed and gendered experiences of urban youth, they are still human stories worthy of consideration by any reader.

During the early days of the United States, White men worried that novels would corrupt the minds of women and the poor, both of whom were considered important populations in the young nation. Women's significance at the time stemmed from their roles as keepers of the home, childbearers, and educators of the next generation. Since the poor were the lifeblood of the new workforce, their basic literacy was important, but controlling what the poor read was vital to maintaining their ability to be productive members of society. As is the case with nearly every moment popular culture challenges the dominant culture, critics of the early novel disparaged its production and consumption as a marker of civilization's decline or a harbinger of degeneration among the masses. They argued that the novel denigrated the artful world of letters, wrung their hands over the ill influences that might overwhelm vulnerable readers, and criticized authors for prioritizing pleasing their fans over attending to literary craftsmanship. They worried that texts like these might undermine the establishment of an educated, moral, civil citizenry. (Davidson, 1986; Stern 2008)

These paternalistic "concerns" for the effects of certain types of popular fiction on their readers echo through street fiction as well. The entire genre has been dismissed as "smut" or "pornography for Black women" (Chiles, 2008). While there are descriptions of graphic sexuality, violence and criminality in street fiction, to dismiss the whole corpus as garbage because of them flattens the genre, suggesting that it is homogenous and that there is no possibility for anything artistic to emerge it. The genre is already marked by fluidity in terms of

conventions, style, and content, and it seems that writers are actively testing its boundaries. Examples of these variations include a growing selection of LGBTQ and Christian street fiction (Morris, 2011), Jamir Robert Johnson's street fiction graphic novel entitled *5 Shots* (2008), and Pamela M. Johnson's poetry-infused street fiction novel/memoir: *From a Hard Rock to a Gem* (2003). Furthermore, the timeless paranoia over the reading habits of various "impressionable" or "at risk" groups often serves as a red flag of hegemony at work. Studies have shown there is no conclusive evidence showing a direct causal relationship between consuming texts that depict violence and the commission of violent acts (Gentile & Bushman, 2012; Ferguson, 2011) though popular texts often provide a tempting scapegoat for social problems (Springhall, 1998). Vilifying popular texts rarely identifies the complex source of social ills, but it does drastically underestimate readers' abilities to think about what they read. Readers do not abandon their abilities to be critical simply because they read about characters who share their racial or gender identity (Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008, p. 665; Davis, 2000, p. 260).

Street fiction novels are popular for more than their ability to entertain or pass the time. They are relatively inexpensive windows into specific worlds which are accessible to people who are often made to feel excluded from mainstream American society and its literary circles. The stories have pedagogical and pleasurable elements, and, like early American novels, they give people who may feel marginal(ized) access to political and social discourses through the stories they tell (Davidson, 1986, p.10). Novels of the early Republic coincided with the burgeoning idea that the nation belonged to all Americans, not just a ruling elite. Similarly, the current street fiction renaissance began during the culture wars of the 1990s, when liberal critics exposed the thin veneer of American exceptionalism, the notion of the "traditional" family and its values, the dominance of "western" culture (Hartman, 2015). If the "novel is a genre that 'authorizes' the

reader as an interpreter and a participant in a culture's fictions" (Davidson, 1986, p. 45), street fiction, then, emboldens those who somehow identify with the characters presented in its pages to enter conversations about power struggles, (in)equity, (in)justice, and the desire for freedom. Perhaps when readers say that the books are "real," part of what they mean is that aspects of their own identities and the forces that shape them are validated in the pages of street fiction.

Though the early American novels are not the only sets of American texts that were scorned for their content and their possible ill effects on vulnerable readers, I highlight them extensively here to prove the point that the criticism of street fiction is hardly new. Dime store novels of the early 1900s, hard-boiled detective fiction such as the works of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, science fiction, graphic novels, horror, and romance novels have all taken their turns on the cultural hot seat (Barnard, 2008). However, over time, examples of the aforementioned genres have found a place at the table of American literature. In 1844, Frederick Whitaker wrote a newspaper article shielding the dime store novels of his era from the barbs of criticism. He wrote: "Had [Edgar Allen] Poe lived in these days he would have been a writer of dime novels; for his prose stores have all the qualities which are required in a good dime...it is only the cheap stories...for which the demand is, and always will be inexhaustible, and which must be depended on for the regeneration of American literature" (Denning, 1984, p. 32). Whitaker speaks to the universality of themes in literature and to the shifting sands of favor within dominant culture, and it is easy enough to make a similar case for street fiction novels as well. Betrayal, revenge, perseverance in the face of adversity, the nature of romantic love—all of these are themes that could be found on the pages of Shakespeare's plays or in street fiction novels. This is the stuff of human stories; it's what compels readers to keep reading, and it is what links this genre with writing that comes before it.

Proximity Between Writer and Reader

Street fiction privileges the relationship between the reader and the writer by making several moves that collapse the distance between the two. First, the stories are often told from the first person, and even if perspective is shifted to the third person, the narrator usually holds a point of view that holds the reader close to the story and implies commentary on the action. Because of this proximity, street fiction readers imagine themselves dealing with the challenges of the street in personal ways. They ride along with the main characters co-experiencing the difficulties they face, reveling in the moments of excess, and wondering what they would do in dire situations in the narratives. Readers are invited to feel the anguish of a friend's betrayal, the jealousy over a former lover. They are intimate insiders in the story, even when readers see the plot unfold from all angles they feel it from the protagonist's point of view. This proximity contributes to the trope of the cautionary tale in street fiction where readers can see the consequences of involvement in the drug trade, prostitution, incarceration, theft or murder in a world of fantasy. Readers can learn from the protagonists' mistakes—whether the missteps revolve around the pitfalls of greed, the complications of romantic or sexual relationships, the pain of betrayal, or the drive to earn respect. Many street fiction tales are framed as tell-all confessions; they are accounts in which the protagonist testifies and the reader is left to judge his or her actions, gleaning some wisdom that is applicable to real life.

Street fiction achieves proximity among readers and writers by collapsing the importance of the publisher in the creation of books. The making of street fiction is part of its story, since authors self-published outside of traditional commercial channels to get their stories into the marketplace. Even books sold by major companies are published under special imprints to make

them look more like homegrown products than mass-market commodities. For example, both Simon & Schuster's Cash Money Content Imprint and Kensington's Urban Books imprint maintain separate websites from the parent corporations, making them look like independent entities unaffiliated with large publishing houses. Though Vickie Stringer's Triple Crown Publications is no longer in business, it was a major independent purveyor of street fiction during the 2000s. According to a study of women prisoners who read street fiction, Triple Crown "has played such a central role in shaping urban fiction that some women identify all urban books as Triple Crown books" (Sweeney, 2012, p. 142). When Urban Books/Kensington bought the rights to a number of its titles, it kept the label "Triple Crown" and followed it with "Collection" on the book covers, speaking simultaneously to the "classic" status of many of Triple Crown's titles amongst street fiction readers, and maintaining independent brand recognition (see Appendix, Figure 1). Cash Money Content (with authors such as Iceberg Slim, Wahida Clark, Treasure E. Blue) and Urban Books (with authors such as Nikki Turner, Keisha Ervin and Marc Anthony) both feature cover art that does not stray much from the style established by the independent street fiction publishers in the 2000s like Triple Crown Publications. A few authors' books, such as K'wan Foye's and Ashley & JaQuavis Coleman's, feature cover art that looks more like crime/drama movie posters, but generally speaking, book covers in street fiction have kept relatively consistent styles since the early 2000s (see appendix, figures 1 and 2).

Novels signal proximity in the way the books' visual presentation to the reader. Fonts, images, colors graphics on covers speak in a visual grammar similar to hip-hop album covers, again cueing a connection to the relationship between some members of Black and brown urban communities and hip-hop culture. In figure 3 (see appendix), I juxtapose a sample of street fiction book covers with hip-hop album covers to show the visual links among them. Similar

fonts, the figuration of props like cars and cash to show wealth, styles of clothing, low-income urban housing as backdrops, and the direct, assertive gaze toward the camera are just some of the elements that echo across the covers of albums and books, signaling an insider relationship with the Black and brown urban street youth culture that often serves as the milieu and subject matter for hip-hop.

Furthermore, street fiction novels feature and/or locational or aesthetic reference points that socioculturally situate the story. From the first few, a reader can ascertain where and when the story takes place, and whether the story centers on crime, romance, a cautionary message, or redemption. In *Snow*, the following narration first introduces the reader to Snow, the protagonist: “But by the time I was fifteen, the word *snow* meant something completely different. It was the confetti made of cold that reminded me of how Black and broke I was, sitting on the rotting wood benches in front of the projects on 7th Street, selling rocks to the most desperate fiends just before dawn, just a few blocks away from the DC they show you on TV. I put rocks in the hands of people who trudged through the snow without a show in sight, livin’ only for their next ten dollar hit” (Jasper, 2007, p. 4–5). Here, the narrator not only reveals his race, age, occupation, and geographic location, he also places himself in another world. The altered state of his world makes the familiar strange, drawing the reader into a world where a simple noun like *snow* takes on new grim meanings. The bleak details in the scene such as the “rotting wood benches” and the “desperate fiends” who approach him for drugs tell us that Snow is a reluctant participant in this world—if he could make the world over to situate himself differently in it, he would. That urge is precisely what motivates Snow throughout the remainder of the story.

Usually, within the first few pages, there is a scene that sets the tone of the novel and situates the reader in relation to the protagonist. I refer to this as a “gatekeeper scene.” This

scene, typically featuring a graphic sexual encounter, a trauma, or a violent criminal act offers an indication of the kind of street story the author is telling, be it a crime drama, cautionary tale, erotica, or other type of narrative, and it provides a suggestion about how the protagonist should be “read.” This seems to be a tradition that traces back to Iceberg Slim’s era, as the first scene of his book is a graphic depiction of the narrator’s childhood sexual abuse at the hands of his adult babysitter (Slim, 1969, p. 1). At the beginning of *Dirty Red*, the protagonist proudly tricks her boyfriend into believing she is having his baby by faking a pregnancy test, then she seduces him to further deceive him. *Animal* begins with the body of a young Black man lying out on the street as police investigate the crime scene and his mother weeps in the arms of one of the detectives as he restrains her from lifting the sheet off the corpse. A disguised Animal, protagonist and perpetrator of the crime, stands back among the crowd observing the scene and thinking of his girlfriend, Gucci, who is in a coma after having been shot by one of his enemies: “Animal...felt better after finally being able to spill the blood of his enemies, but Slick had only been an appetizer to the main course. His wrath would be the stuff of legends, and his enemies would feel what he felt—*pain*. He knew before fleeing to New York that the situation was bad, but he had no idea how bad. Though Tionna had tried to assure him that what had happened wasn’t his fault, he couldn’t help but to feel like it was...he could’ve been there for Gucci. His only solace was that he had gotten to see her for a little while when he returned home, but the homecoming was a bittersweet one” (Foye, 2012, p.15). *Animal*’s first few pages set up the protagonist as both a killer and a loving boyfriend with a strong sense of justice. These examples show that the beginnings of the novels define the protagonists’ dynamic with the “streets”, and link the reader to the protagonist sympathetically (as in the cases of Snow or Esperanza), antipathetically (as in the case of Red), or in some push-and-pull between the two (as in the cases of *Animal* and *Pimp*).

Writers repeatedly orient readers toward the protagonist early in the narrative through their uses of language, contextual cues, and tone.

Further contributing to this sense of proximity, the authors *are* the story. Authors are called upon to explain how their own lives intersect with those of their characters. Writers who have been “othered” by living through problems associated with life in low-income urban areas such as criminal activity, incarceration, physical abuse, addiction and systemic social injustices seem more real to street fiction readers. Paradoxically, the characteristics or life experiences that might set street fiction authors apart from mainstream society are precisely the things that initiate them into the community of readers and writers that form around these novels. It follows then that in this genre, the authors’ “street cred” ranks high among the criteria readers use when they determine which books to read. Writers must have insider status with this community in order to be deemed authentic. Though I can think of music genres where authenticity was or is important (country music, hip-hop), I do not know of any other written genres that demand such a measure of lived experience by the author so that the writing is deemed palatable to readers. This gives street fiction a folk sensibility rarely found in other modern literature. It is rooted in particular groups of people, in a particular spaces and times.

In nearly every interview of street fiction authors I found on street fiction publisher pages, fan sites, or blogs such as The Urban Book Source (<http://theubs.com/>) or Dr. Vanessa Irvin Morris’s street literature blog (<http://streetliterature.blogspot.com/>), interviewers spend considerable time delving into the authors’ personal histories. Authors often highlight their reluctance to imagine themselves as professional writers, though they often note they enjoyed the act of writing at other times in their lives. Reflecting the demographics of many poor urban areas, most street fiction authors identify as Black, Afro-Latinx, or Latinx, though there likely would

be room for authors with other racial and cultural identities if they wrote authentically about the subject matter. Even so, African-American voices dominate the genre, and authors present themselves as people who can speak genuinely about their own lives or the lives of people they know.

Authors' personal narratives often include a pivotal moment that turned them toward the world of writing. For some authors like Kiki Swenson, Wahida Clark, and Kwame Teague, the pivotal moment happens when they are incarcerated, and they decide to use writing as a way of telling their own stories or simply passing the time in prison (Brown, 2011). For others like JaQuavis and Ashley Coleman, a need to make money or a personal tragedy paved the way to their authorship (Rosen, 2015). Consider the following backstory of K'wan Foye:

Foye, 38, was raised mostly in Frederick Douglass by his grandmother after his parents — and many other relatives — succumbed to the 1980s crack epidemic. Back in the day, he sold weed, faked cheques and dabbled in robbery. It was, in the late 1990s, after serving six months for firearms possession and grand larceny in a prison in upstate New York, that he decided to turn his life around. On his release, he found a job at a downtown broker that involved cold-calling Wall Street investors hundreds of times a day to pitch stocks. He didn't last long, quitting a few months later to start hustling again. But then, in 2001, after learning that his mother was dying of cancer he got back in touch with her and began writing what would become his first novel.

Gangsta, published under his first name only like the rest of his books, is the semi-autobiographical story of an aspiring writer who has lost his mother to cancer and is trying to find a way out of his life as a gang lord. Using the email address on the back of *Let That Be the Reason*, a self-published book written by Vickie Stringer while serving a seven-year sentence for selling a kilo of cocaine to an undercover cop, Foye contacted her. She offered to publish Foye's book under her new imprint, Triple Crown Publications — named after her former drug crew — and the pair sold copies of *Gangsta* out of the trunks of their cars, and through street vendors, beauty salons and barbershops in Harlem and Black neighbourhoods on the east coast. The book had been out a year and had sold 80,000 copies before it saw the inside of a Barnes & Noble. The success of *Gangsta* and Foye's next book, *Road Dawgz*, led to a deal with St Martin's Press, a prestigious New York-based publishing house. (Munshi, 2015)

Foye's biography highlights his involvement with some of the harshest aspects of urban street life. Readers learn he stole, sold drugs, used guns, went to prison, and tried to follow the

straight-and-narrow path with a job on Wall Street. In this version of his life story, hustling is portrayed as a vocation for Foye; in spite of his efforts to maintain his job in financial services, the streets draw him back. His pivotal moment came at the time of his mother's death, and he was mentored in the book industry by no less than Vickie Stringer, who herself is considered a "queen" of street fiction. In this biography, Foye's story merges with those of his characters, and one gains insight into his deep, personal experience with the subject matter of his novels. The "dirt" in his past and the blessing from a sanctioned author license him as an authentic source of storytelling, thereby vetting him for street fiction audiences. At the point in his biography when he starts selling books out of the trunk of his car, his writing becomes "the game." As evidence of his hustle, we learn he sold 80,000 copies through grassroots marketing before selling his books at a traditional bookstore. This fact testifies to Foye's savvy—he circumvents the White-dominated publishing industry, becoming a commercially successful writer on his own terms and with the support of the same communities about which he writes. In many narratives like Foye's, there is a sense that the author parlays his street smarts and skills into writing and publishing books, transforming liabilities in his life into assets. By reading these authors' stories, audiences vicariously participate in the triumph over adversity, the re-invention and the self-defining that takes place. Furthermore, readers gain first-hand insight into the kinds of maneuvers they might need to make if they, too, would like to write professionally.

Though they use the channels of the White-dominated industry of book publishing, street fiction authors are not accused of "acting White" or betraying any sense of collective Black identity when they create their works (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2004). Instead, the way street fiction authors talk about their writing reveals a self-perception of having infiltrated the world of publishing as an act of resistance. Their language shows they see themselves as having

re-appropriated the writing and publishing of books so that people from “the ’hood” can access these processes. In reflections on their craft, writers unify the ’hood with the writing process; writing is often referred to as “the game,” publishing and selling one’s books is described as “hustlin’,” and writers who are commercial successes are respected as much for their ability to turn a profit as they are for the content of their stories. Street fiction recasts the meanings of literacies in the terms of the ’hood moving the locus of control away from flawed, unjust school systems where there is a dearth of teachers and mentors of color. Instead, descriptions of street fiction literacy practices mark them as being of the ’hood, by the ’hood and for the ’hood.

I have heard teachers say that street fiction books have no literariness worthy of study, that reading levels of the books are low, and that the poor copyediting makes the books difficult to read. While I will address the subject of literariness later in this study, the copyediting and readability merit discussion because they can be factors in the distance between readers and authors. As to readability, I noted earlier that street fiction is often dialogue-heavy with various regional dialects of AAVE employed as the primary language. I believe this is the primary obstacle when newcomers such as White middle-class teachers attempt to explore the genre. If one is unfamiliar with the language, it can seem opaque. Iceberg Slim’s *Pimp*, for instance, can be challenging reading if one is not fluent in 1970s-era Black urban vernacular. It can take time to tune one’s ear to the language, though the same can be said for Anthony Burgess’s novel, *A Clockwork Orange* (which is often taught in high school English classes). However, I think questioning the readability of street fiction becomes a surrogate method of censoring the texts. To test my theory, I ran excerpts from a few street fiction texts and a few books common in high school English classes through an online readability scorer to check the reading levels of the texts (<https://readability-score.com/text/>). The online tool measured and averaged the scores from

the following tests for each excerpt: Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, Gunning-Fog Score, Coleman-Liau Index, SMOG Index, and the Automated Readability Index (see appendix, table 1). To be fair to street fiction, I chose texts that might be considered “canonical” among readers of the genre since the high school English texts are already curated and culturally sanctioned. In general, the street fiction texts scored at about the same levels (and sometimes higher) than texts used in high school English. Clearly, this is a small set of data, and readability scoring is only one measure of textual complexity, so I do not wish to overstate the importance of the results. However, I do believe the numbers here suggest that teachers who worry about giving students texts that are “of poor quality” or that are “too easy to read” may need to further evaluate their reasoning behind these statements.

When copyediting gets in the way of a reader’s ability to make sense of a text, it is a problem. This happens in street fiction novels at times, and street fiction authors themselves are aware and critical of the issue. Consider K’wan Foye’s remarks on copyediting:

My first book, *Gangsta* was probably one of the most horribly edited books in the history of the world because they printed it exactly how I sent it to them. You have to keep in mind that I started out writing freehand and then I typed *Gangsta* with one finger. I didn’t even know what the “tab key” was for so I would just count over four spaces on the spacebar, and those were my indents. The book was printed just like that, but it was about the story...the emotion of the story, and I was just one of the lucky ones who had a poorly edited book, was able to learn from it and get better with it. A lot of people don’t take the time to get their stuff edited and cleaned up properly. Your sister’s baby cousin T.T., who was real good at English in high school, is not necessarily a qualified editor, but she’s cheaper so you’re going to let her do it. (Lewis, 2012)

The kinds of errors one sees in many street fiction texts are at best laughable, and at worst cause continuity issues. What is more, readers often have a high level of tolerance for errors that do not interrupt their enjoyment of the story. I liken this to Coleridge’s concept of “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge, 1817). There’s a certain amount of error or discontinuity

one can tolerate if one is deeply invested enough in the narrative, the characters, or the world of the novel. These problems occur even in the most beloved classics. I love *Moby Dick*, and there are some stunning scenes that inspire profound thought. But I have to admit, I did not need to read so much of Melville's whale research. *Fahrenheit 451* is another book I enjoy for its themes, but stylistically, I find many passages unnecessarily repetitive. Still, overall, the book is captivating. My point here is that readers read with purpose; one naturally makes allowances depending on one's motivations for reading, and one reads texts differently depending on what one expects to get out of them. If I read Dom DeLillo hoping for romance, I am going to be disappointed—no matter how excellent the writing may be. On the other hand, street fiction readers may be looking for stories that reflect certain personal experiences, identities, or challenges. If their specific desires are fulfilled by the narratives, a few copyediting errors would do little to repel them from the genre.

Pamela Johnson, a self-published street fiction author and owner of Macavelli Press, an independent publishing company, expressed her opinion on this issue in a blog post. After attending a National Book Club Conference where she heard a prominent street fiction author and established publishing houses attacking the self-published and independent bookmakers for relatively minor grammar and copyediting errors. She responded:

Perhaps someone should have pointed out there was this old White playwright from way back in the day whose folios were riddled with technical errors, but how despite this shortcoming William Shakespeare appeared to have stood the test of time quite nicely. If someone somewhere unearthed an unpublished Shakespeare folio, typos and grammar certainly would be no bar to publishing it! I'll grant that some small publishing houses and self-published writers have quality control issues. Of course, one can read mainstream bestsellers by the likes of Danielle Steele and Tom Clancy and find the occasional typo, extra carriage return, repeated or omitted line of text, and so on. As Thoreau said, to err is human, and there are layers of humans and machines between the author's brain, the word-processor, the layout, the galley copy, the typesetter, and the final copy sitting on a bookseller's shelf. Sometimes these errors can even add value to a

copy; ask any book collector. But in the end, I submit that perfection in editing and printing aren't necessary to a good story, and won't save a bad one. This is not said to excuse writers, editors and publishers from knowing the fundamentals of their crafts—indeed they should—but to borrow from the aforementioned Bard, “the lady doth protest too much.” (2009, Johnson)

As a final word on this discussion of readers and writers in street fiction, I would like to caution people away from imagining an essentialized version of the street fiction audience. Though authors often express their desire to tell their stories to young people who grow up facing some of the same challenges they encountered, street fiction's popularity extends the readership beyond those who live in urban neighborhoods. According to Dr. Vanessa Irvin Morris, author of *The Street Lit Advisory Guide*, 93% of libraries nation-wide have street fiction among their collections (Glaston, 2013). This assertion pushes back against the narrative that street fiction is only for people who cannot or will not read anything else. In my own experience, the readers of street fiction novels I encountered in my classroom and in research settings consumed many other genres and types of texts. They were not deficient in skill or experience. The setting for street fiction novels may be specific, but when themes in the stories are treated well by the author, the stories can be captivating to all readers, regardless of their identities. In the words of street fiction author Torrey Maldonado, “You can't say because a Black boy is on the cover of the book, that this book is only for Black people (Hammond, 2011).” Thinking of street fiction as out-of-bounds for a White reader from a rural or suburban area is a limiting, antiquated, and arguably racist mindset. Like hip-hop before it, street fiction has a readership beyond the neighborhoods it depicts.

At times, America's vacillation between vilification and celebration of the 'hood borders on fetishization. The “... ‘ghetto’ continues to be the Achilles heel in American society, the repository of bad values and economic failure, or the source of a vibrant culture of resistance”

(Kelley, 2001). These contradictory yet simultaneously held views call the purpose of the street fiction novel into question...is it meant to educate? To inculcate people into a particular culture? To validate a way of life? To serve a particular political agenda? If “literature...makes possible cross-cultural recognition” it also “shapes a citizen-subject who is responsive to cultural and political discussion” (Green, 8). Street fiction shows that America has not yet fully answered questions about literature that have been raised time and again over the past 200 years. While street fiction does not provide definitive answers to these questions, it does remind readers to keep searching for them.

Street Fiction and African-American Literature

Though African-American literary history is an important part of the American landscape of letters, many students of all racial identities are still taught about literature from a universalist perspective that ignores or glosses over the tradition of African-American literary criticism. If the schools I have learned and taught in are any indication, instruction in African American literary theory, specifically, is rarely emphasized in the high school curriculum. When it appears in college settings, it is often presented as an elective. In the 1990s, Gloria Ladson-Billings, along with scholars like James Banks and Lisa Delpit, called upon educators to revise their curriculum and practices to make their classrooms more culturally relevant and therefore more equitable for all students (Ladson-Billings, 2015; Banks, 1994; Delpit, 1988). There may be more representation of Black American authors in schools, but that does not mean that African-American literary theory is leveraged in reading the texts. Viewing African-American literary texts with lenses that draw solely on the European literary tradition leads to a myopic view of the texts.

Regardless of whether one believes the representations on their pages are accurate, street fiction texts offer some explorations of what it means to be Black in America's urban centers, and because of this, the novels contribute to a longstanding tradition of using fiction a creative space for establishing, reflecting, and reinventing Black identities in America. Though some critics from the African-American literary community would like to distance themselves from street fiction, several features of African-American literature apply to the novels. Indeed, the connection to the tradition is more than skin deep. To approach street fiction without an acknowledgement of the way African-American literary theories apply to it is to do so blindly, and scholars have yet to trace the relationship in depth. In an effort to address these missing links, I will point to the threads running through both street fiction and African-American literature.

Words and worlds in black and white. Because slavery's legacies run so deeply through American history, conceptualizations of race are intimately bound up with American identities. It stands to reason, then, that racial identities figure prominently in our literature. *In Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), celebrated author and literary critic Toni Morrison traces the connections between Whiteness and Blackness in American literary heritage. She contradicts the notion among critics that "because American literature has been clearly the preserve of White male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of Black people in the United States" (p. 5). For Morrison, the Africanist presence, or the "denotative and connotative Blackness that African peoples have come to signify" (p. 7), weaves through the pages of American literature, and the construction of race has been very

much the work of American authors (whether or not they were conscious of it). In spite of critics' efforts at ignoring African-American texts, Morrison notes that the construction of the American Africanist persona permeates canonical texts written by White authors, and that the representation of Blackness reflects the "fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious" (p.17). Morrison extends her analysis, explaining how Americanness came to be synonymous with Whiteness, and how the othering of Africanism provided the structure for establishment of an American national identity.

I want to suggest that these concerns—autonomy, authority, newness and difference, absolute power—not only become the major themes and presumptions of American literature, but that each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity. Autonomy is freedom and translates into the much championed and revered "individualism"; newness translates into "innocence"; distinctiveness becomes difference and the erection of strategies for maintaining it; authority and absolute power become a romantic, conquering "heroism"; virility, and the problematics of wielding absolute power over the lives of others. All the rest are made possible by this last, it would seem—absolute power called forth and played against and within a natural and mental landscape conceived of as a "raw, half-savage world." (p. 44-45)

Street fiction is infused with racialized American in urban American settings. Its narratives depend in part upon deeply embedded notions of what it means to be Black in America. The characters' lives take place in an environment that presupposes White supremacy and systemic racism arching back through the generations. This is the backdrop against which the players in the texts perform; it is deeply felt and understood even when there is no explicit mention of it. Characters often suggest an awareness of the links among Whiteness, Blackness, and American national identities. In *Picture Me Rollin'*, for instance, the lead badboy character, Jesus, muses: "[There] ain't nothing more American than a thug. Ain't nothing more true to the American game than a gangsta." (p.174). Author Vickie Stringer struck a similar chord when she

discussed the attraction Americans have to the “hustler” in a recent interview. She commented: “We do idolize the gangster, the hustler. We idolize the tenacity. Hustlers like challenges. Great risk, great rewards. We’re gamblers” (Thomas, 2016). If, as Morrison asserts, much of American literature can be read as a project to construct a mythologized, vilified notion of Blackness, then street fiction merits study to consider how racial and national identities figure in the narratives.

Like other American literature, street fiction is preoccupied by individualism, assertion and enforcement of difference, authority and power over others, and toughness. These themes combine in the novels to form precisely the kind of inhospitable landscape Morrison describes. Street fiction undoubtedly includes a host of stereotypical Black characters. Drug dealers, pimps, sex-worker, hustlers—characters like these are often featured in the novels, and their lives frequently counter traditional notions of lawfulness, respectability, and order. But what can one learn from authors’ portrayals of racial identities in these texts? Plenty of literary and cultural critics read street fiction with a genuine concern over negative representations of Black and brown lives. They argue that authors of street fiction fall prey to the internalized racism that stems in part from the American Africanist persona, or worse yet, that authors seek to profit from the vilification of Blackness in American culture. These criticisms are not new, as Sterling Brown’s 1930 essay “Our Literary Audience” demonstrates. Brown explains the struggle over representation he observed then that remains relevant today. He writes: “We look upon Negro books regardless of the author's intention, as representative of all Negroes, i.e. as sociological documents. We insist that Negro books must be idealistic, optimistic tracts for race advertisement. We are afraid of truth telling, of satire. We criticize from the point of view of bourgeois America, of racial apologists. As a corollary to the charge that certain books ‘aiming at representativeness’ have missed their mark, comes the demand that our books must show our

‘best.’ Those who criticize thus, want literature to be ‘idealistic’; to show them what we should be like, or more probably, what we should like to be” (Brown, 1930, p.72–73).

In light of Brown’s commentary, I posit another way of seeing street fiction in relationship to Morrison’s observations about American literature. Perhaps in their writing, street fiction authors have an opportunity to carve out a proprietary space to write about the American Africanist persona for their own purposes, in their own language, and with their own narratives. White cultural producers and gatekeepers have historically controlled representations of Black and brown people in American culture, whether in the publishing industry, Hollywood, or music (Hurston, 1950; Lawrence, 2007; Rose, 2008). The pimp, hustler, drug dealer, sex-worker have all been offered up as being synonymous with terms like “Black” and “urban.” Street fiction authors have the power to trouble, re-appropriate, and riff on these representations, using the “same-old” characters to tell new stories. Rather than thinking of these characters as being stereotypical, one might consider their allegorical dimension. They are vessels that contain a certain meaning about the social, political, historical and cultural forces that act on this “type” of person. Much like the many variations the word “nigger” signaled by different spellings, capitalizations, and pronunciations, representations of these characters hinge on a basic understanding of the “original” trope, along with a refigured version infused with new meanings. This act of revision and reinterpretation of “stock” characters is an act of Signifyin(g) (Gates, 1988). “Signifyin(g) is a way of saying one thing and meaning another; it is a reinterpretation, a metaphor for the revision of previous texts and figures; it is tropological thought, repetition with difference, the obscuring of meaning—all to achieve or reverse power, to improve situations, and to achieve pleasing results for the signifier” (Perry, 2004, p.61) Signifyin(g) as Gates and Perry describe it is one of the forces at work in street fiction that links it with hip hop and other African

American art forms. Part of signifyin(g) can be the trope of the “yarn,” a kind of tall tale that is meant to teach, entertain, impress or tickle (Perry, 2004).

In her 1934 essay entitled “Characteristics of Negro Expression” Zora Neale Hurston outlines a number of elements of African-American communication that are relevant to street fiction, including *drama*, *the will to adorn*, and the *absence of the concept of privacy*. Hurston wrote: “Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama. Everything is acted out” (1934, p. 80). Hurston uses a description of a young man on a “street corner [...] with nothing but his clothing, his strength, and his youth” who does not bend or cower, but whose “posture exults ‘Ah, female, I am the eternal male, the giver of life. Behold in my hot flesh all the delights of this world. Salute me, I am strength’” (Ibid.). We see the same kind of drama unfold in the flirtations between Alonzo and Portia in *Animal*, as is evident in the following brief exchange between them. As Alonzo drops Portia off at her house, she says: “How did you know where I lived when I didn’t give you the address?” Alonzo placed his hand on his chest. “The heart is better than a GPS.” He winked. “Yo, if you only knew how stalkerish you sounded just now.” She laughed and shoved him playfully (Foye, 2012, p. 235). Their gestures, their language, and the interaction between them heighten the sense of drama in the scene, making their mutual attraction clear. Like many others before them, characters in street fiction express drama in the way they dress, the way they enter a room, the way they confront a rival. One sees the dramatic play out in both mundane and grand moments in the novels.

Another feature of African-American expression Hurston highlights in her essay is *the will to adorn*. To illustrate her point, that “there can never be enough beauty, let alone too much,” Hurston describes an ornate living room she once saw in Mobile, Alabama: “[...] there was an

overstuffed mohair living-room suite, an imitation mahogany bed and chifforobe, a console victrola. The walls were gaily papered with Sunday supplements of the *Mobile Register*. There were seven calendars and three wall pockets. One of them was decorated with a lace doily. The mantel-shelf was covered with a scarf of deep homemade lace, looped up with a huge bow of pink crepe paper. [...]. It was grotesque, yes. But it indicated the desire for beauty. [...] We each have our standards of art, and thus are we all interested parties and so unfit to pass judgment upon the art concepts of others. Whatever the Negro does of his own volition he embellishes” (Hurstun, 1934, p. 85). Part of the pleasurable fantasy in street fiction comes from over-the-top descriptions of fancy clothing, houses, cars and food to show bounty and opulence. In *Dirty Red*, for instance, Red’s Detroit home looks like something from *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. In addition to its “décor of English Tudor,” the house has a “grand entrance,” marble floors” that “sparkled in the morning sun” thanks to the “skylights,” and a “winding” staircase with “customized wrought-iron banisters” (Stringer, 2006, p. 23). Though this is just one example, it shows the will to adorn lives on in some of the lavish descriptions in the genre.

To make her point regarding the *absence of the concept of privacy* in African-American expressions, Hurston explains that African Americans come from “an outdoor people accustomed to communal life. [...] The community is given the benefit of a good fight as well as a good wedding. An audience is a necessary part of any drama” (Hurstun, 1934, p. 88). Hurston notes that African-American expressions often feature public treatment of lovemaking and fighting, and that both of these are considered “high arts” the world over, but that making discussions and displays of them public are part of the culture (Ibid.). Sex and violence are on display in street fiction, and though they account for some of the genre’s negative reputation, I would argue that their presence links the novels to the tradition of openness Hurston describes.

The ability to fight (literally or figuratively) and sexual prowess are often highly valued skills in street fiction, and some readers indicate the graphic depictions contribute to the novels overall sense of realness. While I cannot know what Hurston would think of street fiction if she were alive today, her theoretical stance leads me to believe she would likely urge critics to align their perspectives on street fiction with the discourse communities who produce and consume it.

Richard Wright was a contemporary of Hurston, and though their views of African-American literature often diverged, I find many of his perspectives relevant to street fiction. Wright disparaged writers like Hurston for their frivolous attention to beauty, sentimentality, and aesthetics while there was significant ideological work to be done in Black communities through literature. In his essay *Blueprint for Negro Writing*, Richard Wright criticized previous generations of authors for turning writing into a “hallmark of ‘achievement,’ ” (1937, p. 97) or “the voice of the educated Negro pleading with White America for justice” (Ibid., p. 98). He rejected the trajectory of earlier works, saying that “a simple literary realism which seeks to depict the lives of these people [the Black working- and middle-class] devoid of wider social connotations, devoid of the revolutionary significance of these nationalist tendencies, must of necessity do a rank injustice to the Negro people and alienate their possible allies in the struggle for freedom. (1937, p. 101). Wright’s call for writing that resonates with the masses and connects to a deeper project of ending oppression for African-American people resonates with the way some street fiction authors describe their work. Many street fiction authors seem overtly or subconsciously to have been influenced by the stark grittiness of *Native Son*, yet only some, like Kenji Jasper, seem to have carried the explicitly ideological commitment present in Wright’s writing forward to their own work. Wright’s commitment to ending human oppression echoes through Jasper’s remarks: “[...] one of the threads that has run through a lot of my work is the

world's general disregard for human life at this point. My characters have stood on either side of that struggle—whether they were hired assassins, whether they were targets, whether they were journalists getting in the middle of these ego-oriented beefs that really weren't about anything in the outside world, you know—and the conflict that disregard for human life has caused” (Turpin, 2013). Stories in street fiction novels, with all their polyvocality and varied agendas, often wrap up life lessons, action-packed drama, and wild sexual or consumer fantasies in one text. I see elements of both Wright's and Hurston's commitments in much of street fiction, which contributes to the tensions and contradictions present in the genre.

As I have previously mentioned, a holistic conceptualization of street fiction requires insider familiarity with the discourses embedded within it, part of which come from the African-American literary tradition. Theorists from within the tradition during the Harlem Renaissance and particularly during the Black Arts movement have called for the use of lenses developed within African-American communities in the criticism of African-American literary productions, and they have located the roots of African-American culture among the popular works of the “masses”. Critics point to folk productions such as blues music as the font of African-American culture (Hurston, 1934; Baraka, 1966; Lee, 1971; Baker, Jr., 1981) deeming it the folkloric bedrock of innovation, originality, and storytelling. Building on Larry Neal's work on the Black Aesthetic in poetry and Stephen Henderson's work on the “grammar” of African-American artistic discourse, Houston Baker, Jr. advocates for an “anthropology of art” as a starting point for the discussion of African-American literature (Baker, Jr., 1981, p. 323). Agreeing with his predecessors that “works of Afro-American literature and verbal art can not be adequately understood unless they are contextualized with in the interdependent systems of Afro-American culture”, Baker opens the field of criticism to perspectives from “many disciplines” (Ibid., 324).

He writes: “Rather than ignoring (or denigrating) the research and insights of scholars in the nature, social, and behavioral sciences, the anthropology of art views such efforts as positive, rational attempts to comprehend the full dimensions of human behavior” (Ibid., 324-325). I find Baker’s perspective helpful in reading street fiction since it draws roots from African-American literary tradition without restricting the use of other ways of seeing or knowing.

Given that so many of the books are written by women, they can also be a space to critically examine some of tensions and complications arising from intersectionalities of race, class, and gender. Often, street fiction narratives portray the lives of Black and brown women from urban environments, and many of the stories are penned by female authors who share or identify with aspects of their characters’ experiences. As Patricia Hill Collins notes: “Reclaiming the Black women's intellectual tradition involved examining the everyday ideas of Black women not previously considered intellectuals” (Collins, 2002, p. 15). The women who write street fiction typically do not come from elite intellectual backgrounds, and the stories, while not always wholly liberatory, do often feature the lives of women. The “everydayness” of the women in street fiction depends on how fantastic the author makes the narrative, though even the most outlandish characters wrestle with “real” issues like broken relationships, betrayal, or the struggle to make life match one’s dreams. Street fiction authors place complicated, doubly marginalized identities that are rejected by “African-American” culture and “dominant (White) American culture” front and center; celebrating them, probing their psychologies, delving into the depths of their despair or ruthlessness, and asserting their humanity by making them the subjects of stories. Perhaps most powerfully, the novels situate their female authors in a place of authority, as people who generate knowledge and who take action by publishing their original works.

Language as a marker of difference. Stylistically, street fiction often relies heavily on dialogue, and the characters use African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Ebonics as a marker of their racial and cultural identities. AAVE is not a dialect or inferior version of “standard” English; it is a viable, dynamic language with its own syntax, grammar and style (Labov, 1972; Dillard, 1974; Rickford, 1999; Smitherman 1977, 2000). As Henry Louis Gates points out: “...the Black vernacular has assumed the singular role as the Black person’s ultimate sign of difference, a Blackness of the tongue” (Gates, 1988, p. ix). The characters’ language is a sign of membership in an American street community. Demonstrating this familiarity, “which...refers to group experientiality (sharing cultural norms, values, aesthetics and experiences),” depends upon employing semantic and stylistic markers in one’s language (Alim, 2003, p. 52). If one accepts Toni Morrison’s assertion that Whiteness has been foregrounded in American literary history and that it has been constructed with Blackness in relief, then street fiction, with its linguistic foundations in Black English, is a space that pushes back against the hegemony of “White” (sometimes referred to as “standard”) English, counteracting what Labov (1972) refers to as the “deficit theory” of Black language use. “White” or “Standard” English is not neutral; it is imbued with power. For evidence of this fact, one need only consider the consequences of “sounding Black” in John Baugh’s work on linguistic profiling, the costs of which include being shut out of employment or housing opportunities (Baugh, 2000). Being proficient in “standard” English is expected, and there are serious penalties in education, the workplace, and just about any “official” setting imaginable for failing to speak or write this way. Yet street fiction spills Black language all over the pages of novels—places where stories told in Black Englishes have historically been shut out, marginalized, or ignored. Street fiction is a site

where language, the literacy practices of reading and writing, and the sociocultural/political place that is the 'hood are linked.

Black English is the dominant language of low socioeconomic urban areas because in the periods following the Civil War and during the era of Jim Crow in the South, many African Americans migrated to large urban areas such as Chicago, New York, Atlanta, Detroit in search of economic opportunities from increased industrialization. “From 1916 to 1970, [...] more than 6.5 million southern Blacks moved to the urban North” (Zeigler, 2009, p. 513). Prior to 1900, most American cities did not segregate housing (Massey & Denton, 1993). However, as cities marshaled explicitly racist housing policies such as redlining and blockbusting, they created urban “ghettos”. African-American culture and language formed the bedrock of these communities, and AAVE was shared with all racial and ethnic groups who lived in these neighborhoods. I remember when I taught in San Francisco, I was surprised when I first heard a Cambodian-American student who lived in Hunter’s Point refer to a friend as his “*nigga*.” A shared neighborhood informed his relationship to his friend more than his Asian-American heritage, so he chose precisely the right word for the occasion and for the audience given the aspect of his identity that he wanted to foreground. To underscore this point about language as a marker of one’s sociocultural position, I return to Shakespeare once again. I think of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the language used by Bottom and his “crude” band of players compared to the “refined” language of the fairies and nobles. The messages that come from Bottom’s scenes are framed in his language and represent his way of seeing the world. This does not mean the insights he offers are any less important to the play. The language used in street fiction locates characters in terms of geography, socioeconomic status, and race, but it also situates them in relationship to the malignant, suffocating dominance of Whiteness in the world

of American fiction and American society as a whole.

It is important to note Henry Louis Gates' explanation of the relationship between White and Black Englishes:

What we are privileged to witness here is the (political, semantic) confrontation between two parallel discursive universes: the Black American linguistic circle and the White. We see here the most subtle and perhaps the most profound trace of an extended engagement between two separate and distinct yet profoundly--even inextricably--related to orders of meaning dependent precisely as much for their confrontation on relations of identity, manifested in the signifier, as on their relations of difference, manifested at the level of the signified. We bear witness here to a protracted argument over the nature of the sign itself, with the Black vernacular discourse proffering its critique of the sign as the difference that Blackness makes within the larger political culture and its historical unconscious, (Gates, p.45)

Gates' remarks indicate that Black and "White" Englishes are intimately bound with one another—that they mean in relation to one another, but they represent two distinctly different ways of making meaning from the world around us. Thus, even when the same words are used, the meanings can be quite different. Identities and histories are infused with both languages, guiding their use at each moment. As a major, prolific and contemporary repository of AAVE discourses, street fiction novels, through their very existence, critique the longstanding tradition of privileging White voices, stories and communication in American literature.

The language of street fiction gets negative attention for being explicit. Indeed, it's difficult to get through more than a few pages of most street fiction books without seeing words like *nigga*, *mutherfucka*, or *bitch*. In isolation, these words may be offensive, but reading them that way hardly accounts for the context in which they are written. Spears (1997) would call these utterances "uncensored speech" rather than obscenities. His work shows that the aforementioned words can have different connotations and denotations depending on the context in which they are used. The reader, then, becomes important to the meaning-making process

since s/he can choose a reaction to each utterance. The choice the reader makes is not entirely independent, because it depends on the sociocultural, political, historical, and situational perspectives of the reader. For example, when a man calls a woman he loves his “*nigga*,” in a street fiction novel, the imagined reader, who is expected to be conversant in Black urban youth vernacular language use, is meant to understand the term as one of endearment. The “obscene” language of street fiction, then, is not a reason to dismiss this corpus of writing as non-literary or culturally bankrupt. Rather, the texts might offer an important starting point for discussing contemporary uses of urban vernacular Black English in fiction.

Though localized AAVE vernaculars captured on the pages of the novels represent the linguistic practices of communities in many American cities, it doesn’t mean that street fiction only features AAVE. Like most young people, people in street fiction know how to styleshift. Styleshifting (which others have called codeswitching) refers to one’s ability to change one’s linguistic style to suit the occasion (Alim, 2012, p. 20). There are many examples in the novels of people altering their speaking style or choosing a different word, depending on their audience or purpose. In *Dirty Red* (Stringer, 2006), the protagonist speaks differently with her friends than she does with the woman who is interviewing her for a job in real estate. In *Picture Me Rollin’*, characters use Spanish to denote their Afro-Latinx identities when it suits their semantic purposes. They choose when to use English, Spanish, or a blend of languages depending on the rhetorical situation. When he finds himself in jail, the main character of *Snow* (Jasper, 2007) speaks to his mother in an entirely different manner than he does with the other young men who were sharing his cell. Though everyone styleshifts to make sure diction, tone and syntax meet a given occasion, street fiction shows the particularly rich ways in which Black and brown youths alter their discursive practices. The books serve as another demonstration of the wealth of

linguistic resources available in these communities.

Now that I have explained some of the ways in which street fiction dovetails with African-American literature, I would like to devote some attention to the ways in which the genre complicates it. Street fiction plainly disrupts the White-dominated publishing industry both in terms of means of production and distribution, and in terms of content and style for what the novel is “supposed” to be. As much as the genre draws on African-American literary tradition, I argue that street fiction pushes its boundaries, as well.

The basis of my argument comes from Kenneth Warren’s assertion that “African American literature” is no longer a viable literary label with which to identify writing. He argues that African-American literature coalesced during the Jim Crow era to describe the work of authors whose principal ethos was resistance in the face of segregation. African-American authors were expected to produce literature that fostered social reform, or that reflected well on the entire race. While racial injustice is still pernicious, says Warren, it is no longer a revelation. He writes:

Langston Hughes, in his 1940 autobiography *The Big Sea*, mercilessly panned his Harlem Renaissance contemporaries for having believed “the race problem had at last been solved through Art plus Gladys Bentley,” and that “the New Negro would lead a new life from then on in green pastures of tolerance created by Countee Cullen, Ethel Waters, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Bojangles, and Alain Locke.” Hughes then continued, acerbically, if somewhat disingenuously, “I don’t know what made any Negroes think that—except that they were mostly intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn’t heard of the Harlem Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn’t raised their wages any.” (Warren, 2011)

In this illustration showing the class divide between the “ordinary Negroes” and the “intellectuals,” Warren echoes Bourdieu’s observation that the upper and middle class’s ideas have more value in society than those of the lower class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Langston

Hughes' critique of Harlem Renaissance authors suggests that discrimination can no longer serve as the sole unifying trope in African-American literature because there are other layers of experience that inform African-American literary productions. While I do not suggest that street fiction solves the class divide or even bridges the gap highlighted by Hughes' remarks, perhaps some texts in the genre do open new possibilities in literature. By fostering a sense of independence and control in the telling of stories based on a specific set of experiences within the urban African-American community, and by encouraging a new generation of writers to produce new works, street fiction has the potential to close some of the distance between the "masses" and literary heavyweights like Toni Morrison or Maya Angelou. Street fiction does not abandon discussions of race, but it does make space for conversations about "the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination" such as class and gender (Yosso, 2005, p.73). The genre also values and honors the "experiential knowledge" (Yosso, 2005 p.74) of some inhabitants of poor urban neighborhoods. In this way, street fiction helps refigure and reallocate cultural capital for those who identify with the lives and experiences represented in street fiction novels.

Popular Words: Street Fiction and Hip-hop

Scholars who have written about street fiction have noted the profound influence hip-hop music and culture have had on it, but the available body of scholarship does not delve into the relationship between the two, so I will begin some of that work here. Born in the Bronx in the 1970s, hip-hop has been described as one of the most far-reaching cultural phenomena in the past 30 years (Chang, 2007, p. 60). At its genesis, hip-hop was developed by and for the Black and brown youth of the Bronx who craved creative outlets in the face of horrific urban decay. (Rose,

1994; Chang, 2005; Perry 2004). Hip-hop's four elements are visual/graphic (graffiti), aural (deejaying), oral (emceeing or rapping), and movement or dance (b-boying/breakdancing) (Chang, 2005). Each of these elements served as vehicles through which youth could engage one another and the world around them in non-violent ways in the inhospitable setting of the 1970s South Bronx. Now, hip-hop culture permeates everything from Disney movies and TV commercials (Monteyne, 2013; p. 85) to fashion runaways (Watkins, 2006). Indeed, its popularity continues to grow as various groups embraced it either as an aesthetic/stylistic experience or as a mode of expression, especially where people must speak out against systemic oppression (Osumare, 2001; 2007).

While fiction that deals with the raw inhumanities of urban underclasses seems commonplace in Western literature (see Dickens' *Oliver Twist* or Sinclair's *The Jungle* as examples), street fiction has an interesting historical trajectory as it relates to hip-hop. Street fiction and hip-hop can both be traced back to Robert Beck's (a.k.a. Iceberg Slim) popular works, along with those of Donald Goines and Claude Brown, and many other authors who joined Holloway House publishing company in the 1960s and 1970s (Gifford, 2013). These authors showed a slice of life for some criminalized young Black men living in American cities. The writing of these stories coincided with the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement (Self, 2006, p. 301), seizing audiences who were ready and willing to consume tales with social and political purpose, drawing back what W.E.B. Du Bois referred to as the "veil" of Black urban life. Both hip-hop and street fiction were influenced by the pro-Black rhetoric and political activity of the '60s and early '70s.

Hip-hop music experienced an incredible uptick in commercial popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, while street fiction gained serious momentum only in the late 1990s. Though some

might suggest that the lull in street fiction during the 1970s and 1980s was due to the fact that all the good writers of urban stories were busy composing hip-hop lyrics, I don't believe that tells the whole story. Undoubtedly, a great deal of originality and talent went into creating songs that are now hip-hop classics. Hip-hop music in the 1990s became increasingly socially conscious and political (Perry, 2004), and coincidentally but not accidentally, it was during this time that street fiction found its audience again with books like Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* and Terri Woods' *True to the Game*. Souljah's book, in particular, is credited with rekindling an interest in street fiction given that it was (and still is) a major commercial success.

A place for women: Gender in street fiction and hip-hop. The role of gender in the trajectory of street fiction must be considered. Much of the street fiction of the 1960s and 1970s was written by men, featuring young African-American or occasionally Latino protagonists. When street fiction experienced a rebirth in the late 1990s and early 2000s, women led the way. Most of the novels generated by major street fiction publishing houses during that time were written by women and featured female protagonists. For instance, Triple Crown Publications, the street fiction publishing house established by *Dirty Red* author Vickie Stringer, published a preponderance of books by women authors. Stringer has since gone on to sign with Simon & Schuster, so Triple Crown Publications is no longer an active business. However, of the 20 Triple Crown Publications listed on Barnes & Noble's website that were originally published in the 2000s, 19 were written by women.

Furthermore, many of the spheres of influence of street fiction coming from the first half of the 20th century were dominated by male voices. Detective novels and noir fiction featured predominantly male authors and male protagonists (Gruesser, 2013), Claude Brown, Malcolm X,

Iceberg Slim centered their stories on men, and though many women made significant contributions to hip-hop, the art form was dominated by male voices and perspectives (Rose, 1994). There was little creative space afforded to women in any of these genres, and many of the texts generated by the genres included misogynistic characterizations of them. By the early 2000s, some women writers looking for a creative outlet found an open door in street fiction. Black men's creative participation in street fiction during the past 20 years has undoubtedly been curtailed by the fact that an estimated 1.5 million of them are "missing" from public life due to mass incarceration, homicide, and disease. "Of the 1.5 million missing Black men from 25 to 54 [...] higher imprisonment rates account for almost 600,000. Almost 1 in 12 Black men in this age group are behind bars, compared with 1 in 60 non-Black men in the age group, 1 in 200 Black women and 1 in 500 non-Black women. Higher mortality is the other main cause. About 900,000 fewer prime-age Black men than women live in the United States, according to the census. Homicide, the leading cause of death for young African-American men, plays a large role, and they also die from heart disease, respiratory disease and accidents more often than other demographic groups, including Black women" (Wolfers, Leonhardt & Quealy, 2015).

Women made space for themselves in hip-hop, but they ruled street fiction during that decade. In the pages of their novels, women faced some same topics that were being discussed in hip-hop. They used much of the same vernacular, settings, characters and tropes, but they could choose to subvert the misogyny present in hip-hop music. Sometimes, this subversion simply meant substituting women in positions of power, showing that they could hustle just as well as their male counterparts. The influence of gangsta rap and its commercial success loomed large over street fiction, and like the personas adopted by some male rappers, the women in these novels often tell stories of manipulating the people and circumstances around them in ruthless

ways to make money, earn respect, or gain power. However, other authors took the stories a step further using the space to interrogate the intersectionalities of race, class, and gender in their lives. Their stories were often mined from their own life experiences, and, in accordance with a long tradition in African-American literature stemming back to slave narratives (Stallings 2003), they offer a kind of testimony; they bear witness to the cruelties of Black urban life in America in a way that statistics and sociological reports cannot.

Though women dominate street fiction, it is not free from the same misogyny that permeates hip-hop (Rose, 1994; Perry, 2004). The authors and their characters are complicated, and they have both been shaped by a society where patriarchy and misogyny are alive and well. The authors and characters offer mixed signals when it comes to liberatory practices for women. Some women protagonists in street fiction assert themselves by reversing the traditional man-in-power paradigm and take on the role of subject while objectifying men. Thus, instead of telling a story in which an alpha male protagonist pursues and manipulates “bitches” and “hos,” the alpha female protagonist sets out to get money, sex, and power using sexual prowess and cunning to control the men around her. These narratives merely invert an already perverse power structure between men and women commonly found in both hip-hop and in American culture writ large. However, the fantasy of being in control may indeed be pleasurable for readers or listeners who identify with the female protagonist and who know the sting of objectification in real life. Anyone who has ever seen the movie *Thelma & Louise* (1991) should understand how audiences enjoy a counter-narrative of seeing women in control. The outlaw actions of the two poor (but glamorous) White female protagonists on the lam caused an uproar among some audiences at the time of its release for its “man-hating” feminist subtext, but it received praise from critics (Cooper, 2000). If the protagonists were two Black ex-convicts trying to emancipate themselves

by making livings as drug dealers in Harlem, one might have the makings of a street fiction novel, but I would wager that novel would likely draw fire from critics.

Still, street fiction has the potential to be a space where complex portrayals of Black and brown womanhood take place with the city as a backdrop. Some of the texts included in chapter four of this study explore the delights and complications of relationships between men and women. The novels delve into the emotional and physical aspects of women's romantic and platonic relationships, offering up models for readers as they themselves forge their own relationships in the real world.

Common Ground: Shared Subject Matter and Style in Street Fiction and Hip-hop.

In her thorough treatment of hip-hop in *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics of Hip Hop* (2004), Imani Perry explains the four characteristics linking hip-hop to Black American music: “(1) its primary language is African-American Vernacular English (AAVE); (2) it has a political location in society distinctly ascribed to Black people, music, and cultural forms; (3) it is derived from Black American oral culture; and (4) it is derived from Black American musical traditions” (p.10). The first three of Perry's points apply to street fiction as well as hip-hop. As I explained in the previous section, street fiction authors use AAVE as their primary language, they locate their stories and characters in the “street” (a Black-identified space in the American imagination), and they often rely heavily on dialogue to tell their stories. Unlike hip-hop, street fiction is far less invested in wordplay or the more lyrical elements of language that lend themselves well to beats and rhymes. Stylistically, hip-hop and street fiction differ due to their mode and form. Much of the writing in street fiction is prose, unlike the poetic world of hip-hop. Given the fast pace of the action in street fiction, it sometimes reads more like a film script than a novel. Still,

there are many important thematic and ideological parallels between street fiction and hip-hop. I include some authors' voices here to speak to the connections between these two bodies of creative work.

Many street fiction authors locate their work in relation to hip-hop, or describe it outright as hip-hop literature. Vickie Stringer noted her preference for calling her writing "hip-hop literature" to link it with the broader cultural, phenomenological, and philosophical underpinnings of hip-hop (Thomas, 2016). She notes: "It was the music, the clothing, the culture. When I started, that's what it was. It was the movement [...] Most of the people who call it urban or ghetto fiction, they're trying to say Black, and it's not. It's hip-hop. I was a big Tupac fan. I like rap that tells stories. I don't know what Lil Wayne and these new people be saying, but I like when you can understand a story and follow along. KRS-1, Public Enemy tell us those stories" (Ibid.).

While Kenji Jasper does not shy away from labeling of his work as street fiction or street literature, he does suggest that if his first novel, *Dark*, had come out after hip-hop had been more broadly sanctioned by the dominant culture, he might have had a wider audience and an easier time getting it published. He explains:

It took three years for me to get the book published because pretty much every major publisher told me "no," at the time. This was long before the rise of street lit, I wasn't writing for a magazine or anything, I didn't have any kind of cachet other than the writing that I was doing. [...] I managed to finally get a deal over at Random House and *Dark* was a success and it reached a lot of people. I think it reached a lot of mothers, a lot of guys who were like me, a lot of guys who were like Thai's [the protagonist] friends who were a bit more into the street, who were drug dealers, who were murderers, who had no designs on leaving or knowing anything else, who didn't have anything else to know. [...] Hip hop was still very, very new, it wasn't in a place where it was getting regular airplay or in rotations, wasn't getting awards, it wasn't this culturally acceptable music as of yet so the idea of literature coming out of that was very avant-garde and had a lot of color to it in both senses of the word, the book world didn't want to embrace at first. (Turpin, 2013).

Sofia Quintero prefers to call her work hip-hop literature rather than street fiction or street literature as a way of explicitly linking it to certain traditions and distancing herself from others. In a 2007 interview, Quintero explained how she has actively tried to use her writing as an opportunity to educate the general public about hip-hop.

[...] I often I feel like I'm waging a one-woman campaign to reeducate people both in the industry and the community. First, let me clarify the way I see it. There's this large category called urban fiction. Now the industry uses the word 'urban' as a code to mean mostly "Black" and sometimes also "Latino," but we all know that (1) not all Blacks and Latinos live in urban environments, and (2) not all people or phenomena that is urban is Black or Latino. So when I think of "urban fiction," I think of anything from what I write to the street lit of authors like Vicki [sic] Stringer or Teri Woods to even some titles in the chick lit genre like *Sex and the City* and *The Devil Wears Prada*.

Then within urban fiction you have subgenres. The reason why I distinguish between hip-hop lit and street lit—although overlaps may exist—is because street lit is frequently about street life, particularly about the underground economy. Hip-hop can be—and has been—about much more than that. Not all hip-hop is about gangsterism, and if we want to be consistent, not all gangsterism is hip-hop. Were Meyer Lansky and John Gotti [American organized crime figures] hip-hop heads? No! Furthermore, there are many people in the hip-hop generation and community who do not participate in the underground economy or even aspire to that lifestyle. So as a hip-hop activist, it unnerves me when the term "hip hop" is unilaterally equated with "gangster." The occasional overlap is undeniable, but the terms are NOT synonymous. Many socially conscious people—especially young people and their mentors—utilize hip-hop as a tool to fight injustice whether it's the expansion of prison industrial complex or [to combat] the spread of HIV/AIDS. To insinuate that they're not hip-hop because they're not gangster is not only dead wrong, it's insulting.

When I dropped my debut *Explicit Content*, I sent a polite but impassioned email to almost every journalist that wrote an article about the rise of 'hip hop lit' as not a single one discussed hip hop as a culture that predates gangster rap with its roots in the Black Arts Movement of the 60s. Any street lit author will tell you readily and proudly that his or her predecessors are Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim. But as an author of hip-hop fiction, my predecessors are Richard Wright and Piri Thomas. With the exception of *The Black Issues Book Review*, which published my letter to the editor, no one responded to me. Yet over time I started to notice a difference. I still saw articles about 'street lit' that referred to it as such, and I'd like to think that my tiny gestures had an impact. (McLean, 2007)

Stringer, Jasper, and Quintero are among many authors I have encountered express a desire to align their writing with hip-hop, and this desire extends to a level beyond surface

stylistic markers into the terrain of ideology and purpose.

Fantasy and authenticity. Some of the misreading of street fiction and hip-hop comes from expecting a direct relationship between real life and the representations of “reality” in the text. As Michael Eric Dyson puts it: “Stories don’t have to be real to be true” (qtd. in Perry, 2004, p. 88). Both street fiction and hip-hop feature plenty of fantasies; the authors are not simply recording and reporting. “Outsider” critics who do not have membership in the communities addressed by hip-hop or street fiction fail to understand that writers stylize, embellish, adapt and inflate “reality” for effect or for amusement, but they do so within the larger arc of the novel’s narrative. Certainly, street fiction authors or hip-hop artists, like other creative writers, take varying degrees of liberties with the facts to propel a plot or to add a social critique to a narrative. While some authors offer superficial treatments of problems like mass incarceration, drug use, or sexual abuse, many express a desire to expose their complexities. For instance, Sofia Quintero comments on the pedagogical purpose of using real social issue in her novels:

I think it’s incredibly important for youth to read about all the social constructs and their implications, both the ones that influence their own lives and those that they don’t experience. No matter what personal or social issue they might be grappling with or passionate about, five will get you ten that at the core of it is some “ism.” Folks like to put down “issue” books, but I dare you to find a compelling story that at its spine is not a statement about race, class, gender or any other social identity. The term “issue book” gets flung around as a pejorative, usually at writers from marginalized communities who are writing for their own youth, but Charles Dickens, J.D. Salinger, John Steinbeck etc. have written plenty of “issue’ books.” (The Center for Fiction)

Even when events in hip-hop songs or street fiction novels are somewhat autobiographical in nature, artists do what artists have always done—they take artistic license with raw material to create something new.

Like hip-hop artists, street fiction authors must manage the delicate balance between

fantasy and reality, otherwise they may risk alienating potential readers. Their stories must transport and engage readers while simultaneously keeping them grounded enough in reality to be considered authentic. Imani Perry offers insight regarding the “real” in hip-hop that applies directly to street fiction:

The real is also an authenticating device responding to the removal of rap music from the organic relationship with the communities creating it. It demands that the artist maintain or use symbols asserting their allegiance to Black youth population, or subgroups within that community. The real for hip hoppers means setting the terms for allegiance. It does not disallow fiction, imaginative constructions, or hip-hop’s traditional journey into myth. Rather, it is an explicitly ideological stand against selling one’s soul to the devils of capitalism or assimilation as one sells the art form and lives life. The frequent calls in the hip hop community to keep it real not only require the maintenance of an authentic Black urban identity; they also constitute a theoretical space that functions as a living testimony to African American experience...Being “real” is a call to authenticity that becomes a political act...[it] constitutes a political rather than purely sociological stance that gives testimony to the emotional state resulting from the experience of poverty, Blackness, and the crisis of urbanity. (Perry, 2004, p.87)

Street fiction readers often tout the books for “being real.” The concept functions similarly in both street fiction and hip-hop. “Being real” shows one’s allegiance with Black urban identities and to connotes shared community with the reader. It also acknowledges an understanding of the poverty, systemic racism, and lack of opportunity plaguing Black urban communities. The danger here for both hip-hop and street fiction authors is in being accused of glorifying the most horrible aspects of life in the ghetto simply to make a profit.

Words as commodities: Hip-hop and street fiction in the marketplace. The origins of hip-hop provided street fiction with a blueprint for a kind of grassroots production and distribution of new creative material outside of the mainstream channels. Its epic success also proved the ’hood was fertile ground for commercially successful creative exploits. At present, people talk synonymously about the “inner cities” and “third world countries” as if neither of

these constructed spaces could ever make any contributions to culture (Massie, 2016). Hip-hop resists that narrative in the same way street fiction counteracts the stereotype that Black people do not read (or write) For authors like K’wan Foye and for many hip-hop artists before him, these artistic outlets opened up important avenues for storytelling:

Honestly, it gave every little kid from the ghetto a way out so-to-speak. Like they say when you sling crack rocks, you automatically gotta be a rapper. This was just another outlet, kind of like rap and sports or hustling or whatever. I think what happened was when people started reading more, and people like me, Shannon Holmes and Vicky Stringer came out—we came after Iceberg Slim, they realized that when we entered their homes that we were just like your everyday person; the person from your neighborhood. Most of them were like, if he can do it, well I got a story I can tell too that I need to get out there and get myself some notoriety. Some people of course did it from a therapy angle like I did and were like, you know what, this is a great form of expression and it’s wonderful for my soul and I can get this off my chest without having to worry about people judging me. I can express it in the way of a novel or non-fiction, but I can express the things that I can’t say out loud on paper. I think that’s what kind of initially grew the next crop of authors that came behind us. (Lewis, 2012)

The triumphant fable about hip-hop and street fiction showcases them both as homegrown marketplaces of Black American talent outside of the control of White-dominated mainstream media. This *was* true for both hip-hop and street fiction, to a degree. In a pattern that follows hip-hop artists before them, street fiction authors remark that they have seen a departure from the self-publishing model over time, and they worry what effect the shift will have on the tradition of independent storytelling. K’wan Foye commented on the commercialization of street fiction as major publishing houses have intervened in the marketplace:

[...]Somewhere along the lines, as it kept going on, it started getting crazy. The majors came in. Now you have these big conglomerates or big organizations trying to be our best friends, waving checks at us and saying you can do this, you can do that. I think it’s dope, but I think it also kind of turned into a bit of a circus. Now you have everybody climbing over each other, or Peter trying to knife Paul to get this lucrative publishing deal, which is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. That caused another influx too. So once the

book market became expanded and the money started coming in, everybody wanted to get rich off street fiction. But then if you look at the quality of some of the work, you'd be like, "This is trash, they didn't even care about spelling or errors, etc. If he can do it, and put out this book and make some money, then why can't I do it? I'm not a great writer, but I'm a better speaker than him or her, or I got a better story than him or her, so if they're getting paid, why can't I get paid?" Then you have the mold being lost in the dollar. The mold being lost in the monetary side because people forgot what it was in the beginning, which was self-expression and empowerment. (Lewis, 2012)

As I have mentioned, much of street fiction was self-published and disseminated at community points of interest like barber shops, churches, or out of the trunks of cars on busy city street corners. Hip-hop was first consumed through house parties, and it took until the late 1970s and early 1980s for recordings to be made (Perry, 2004). However, since the 1990s, hip-hop has been criticized by even its most avid fans as being overly commercial, catering more to White, suburban audiences than to its original community of listeners, and prioritizing record sales over craftsmanship and authenticity (Rose, 2008). Sofia Quintero eloquently sums up the tensions between art and commerce in hip-hop and street fiction:

The art vs. commerce debate in hip-hop culture is not one that can be had without raising the fact that hip-hop is something we created that has been appropriated, repackaged, and sold back to us. So that begs the most important question of all: Who benefits most when one kind of literature or film or music is made readily available while other types that we may enjoy as much is [sic] not? I almost must say that I don't think art and commerce cannot overlap, although I do believe that's rare. Not all art sells and not all that sells is art, but that doesn't mean that something that is artistically tight cannot be commercially viable. It's what I'm trying to do with my hip-hop fiction. I want my stories to be enjoyed by all kinds regardless of their economic status or education level. But I'm not using that as an excuse to skimp on my craft, thinking that because some teenage girl will buy my book based on the premise alone that it's cool to be a lazy writer. (Nix, 2009)

Many hip hop artists have been trapped in contracts that keep money earned from their music sales in the hands of promoters, producers and record companies more so than in their own pockets. Likewise, there is a fear among street fiction authors that the genre is headed in the

same direction as major publishing houses source and control the content coming from the most popular writers in the industry (Gifford, 2013).

Technology has mediated both hip-hop and street fiction in interesting ways. On the positive side, for both hip-hop and street fiction, as technology has become cheaper and more sophisticated, it has opened pathways for new artists to make contributions to both forms. For hip-hop, online music platforms make downloading original music from relatively unknown artists easy, broadening the reach of new talent and spreading hip-hop to global audiences. Ever since the boom of the 2000s, street fiction novels are plentiful, and they are inexpensive compared to mainstream books promoted by publishers. Self-publishing has become less expensive, and easier to access since a number of online services like Lulu.com, CreateSpace.com and Amazon.com offer ways for authors to print new material digitally or as hard copies. Kenji Jasper commented on the changes he has observed in the street fiction marketplace: “Particularly with the rise of online media of all kinds...the Nook, the Kindle, the iPad...all of these things...Literature is able to get out there without the two or three major publishing houses that still exist. That business as it was—that tower—is kind of crumbling. Everyone is having to be a lot smarter and more strategic to stay in the Black and to stay relevant with the kind of work they are putting out. I kind of feel like the *Fifty Shades of Grey* generation and the boomers are now moving into the senior citizen part of their lives...I think the folks who have supported books are getting older. New authors have to work harder and find ways to create a crowd or a following in a very cluttered marketplace” (Turpin, 2013). The rise of e-publishing in the genre of street fiction means that the popularity of a new author’s style and storytelling can be market-tested cheaply. Hundreds of street fiction books are available for download for free from Amazon.com, and even more available for \$0.99 or just a few dollars. While the e-

publishing part of the street fiction market offers cheap, easy, and private access to virtually unlimited content, it also means that the genre is awash in new writers, many of whom have yet to hone their talents.

Chapter Three: Research Process and Methodology

The purpose of this study is to move toward a recontextualization of street fiction by first exploring its connections to other spheres of influence including the tradition of the American novel, African-American literary history, popular fiction, and hip-hop. Though this is not an exhaustive list of street fiction's spheres of influence, examining their sway over on the genre creates a more fertile reading environment for textual study. Using critical discourse analysis and cultural studies, and grounded by the theoretical links I trace in the aforementioned recontextualization, I study three key dynamics I observe that seem central to critical readings of street fiction, namely, 1) ambivalence between "straight" lives and "street" lives, 2) the interplay between constructions of "self" and "other" in street fiction, and 3) the dynamics between the "real" and the "fantastic" elements in the novels. In this chapter, I address my decision to use critical discourse analysis and cultural studies methodologies to study the texts, and I highlight key decisions I made over the course of the research. To increase trustworthiness in the study, I clarify my positions in relationship to street fiction and delineate the limitations of the study.

Critical Discourse Analysis as Methodology

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is both a methodological and theoretical framework for this study. I selected CDA for its view of texts as processes rather than static words on a page. CDA encourages the use of an interdisciplinary approach to texts "in order to gain a proper understanding of how language functions in constituting and transmitting knowledge, in organizing social institutions, or in exercising power" (Wodak and Meyer, 2016). As I viewed street fiction through lenses provided by African-American and other literary theorists, through the texts relationship to sociological data, and through the cultural theories instrumental to

studies of popular culture, I gained new insight into the layered and sometimes contradictory complexities of the genre. According to Fairclough (2003), “seeing texts in terms of the different discourses, genres, and styles they draw upon and articulate together is termed ‘interdiscursive analysis’ ” (p. 3). He further suggests that this methodology is advantageous for social research because “the ‘transdisciplinary’ approach aims to enhance our capacity to ‘see’ things in texts through ‘operationalizing’ (putting to work) social theoretical perspectives and insights in textual analysis” Fairclough, 2003, p. 14). This process attends to street fiction’s relationships to other texts as spheres of influence, its functions as a social practice, its role as a space for storing and generating ideologies, and the way authors and readers use and are affected by power structures within and surrounding the novels.

Street fiction as discourse

Through the lenses of CDA, street fiction is a dynamic “social practice” that shapes and is shaped by the people who read and write it (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). Street fiction novels open up a “discourse” shaped by a “dialectical relationship [with] the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) framing it...[This] discourse is sociologically constitutive as well as socially conditioned—it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities and relationships between people and groups of people” (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 258). The nature of the relationships among discourse, society and individuals and their identities outlined in CDA is a useful tool for thinking about street fiction’s ability to mirror and create culture, as well as the power it might have to capture and shape the worldviews of those who read it. This organizing concept accounts for the way street fiction can simultaneously reify and resist social structures, inequalities, and identities, making way for an analysis of the genre

that is neither glorification nor condemnation, but is a contemplative analysis of its tensions.

Ideology and power in street fiction

Ideology is an important concept to both CDA and cultural studies. Fairclough (2003) defines ideologies as: “[...] representations of aspects of the world which contribute to establishing and maintaining relations of power, domination and exploitation. They may be enacted in ways of interaction (and therefore in genres) and inculcated in ways of being identities (and therefore styles). Analysis of texts ... is an important aspect of ideological analysis and critique” (Fairclough, 2003p. 218 qtd. in Wodak and Meyer, 2016). In this study, I have attended to ideologies by thinking about the way street fiction is culturally, socially, historically and politically framed (as in what ideologies go *into* street fiction), and by considering what ideologies are formulated or reflected in the texts themselves (as in what ideologies are *drawn from* the genre). Throughout this study, I have often used Teun van Dijk’s term, “worldview,” (1998) to signal a discussion of ideology as I think it has less of a negative connotation than “ideology” sometimes carries and it more directly points to the dialogical relationships central to this study of street fiction.

Social power relationships and the power novels like street fiction have to describe and shape the world figure prominently in this study. Since street fiction is a segment of popular culture, it is both complicit in and capable of resisting hegemonic discourses, and it is both a commodity and a cultural production. According to cultural theorists, popular culture is a “site of struggle between the ‘resistance’ of subordinate groups and the forces of ‘incorporation’ operating in the interest of the dominant groups. Popular culture [...] is not the imposed culture of the mass culture theorists, nor is it an emerging from below, spontaneously oppositional

culture of ‘the people,’ it is a terrain of exchange and negotiation between the two; a terrain [...] marked by resistance and incorporation” (2006, p. 8). Critical discourse analysis is an appropriate framework for examining the flow of power through and around discourses, mapping flows among discourse, ideology and power. Fairclough writes: “Since discourse is so socially consequential, it gives rise to important issues of power. Discursive practices may have major ideological effects, that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 258). Looking at street fiction through the lenses of cultural theory and CDA calls for consideration of how the genre resists and/or reinforces dominant discourses, how it essentializes and/or accurately represents the lives and social issues depicted in its narratives, and how it restricts and/or opens possibilities for social change through meaning-making.

A Discussion of the Research Process

The trajectory of this qualitative research was recursive and non-linear. Experience opened the door to this work when my students exposed me to street fiction, and my desire to connect our school-based work with texts to their out-of-school readings kept me interested in the genre throughout my years as a high school teacher. I had been thinking about pedagogical possibilities for street literature and other popular culture texts for several years by the time I entered the English Education doctoral program at Teachers College, where I served as a research assistant for Marc Lamont Hill’s ethnographic study of youth responses to street fiction. Throughout this workshop with youth, I observed and recorded conversations among a group of teenagers and a street fiction author as they discussed one of her novels. I transcribed several

hours of conversations from the workshop over a period of three months. I wrote extensive field notes about the workshop where I began weaving questions and theories into my observations, and I had several discussions about the data I collected with Dr. Hill and two fellow researchers whose backgrounds were in sociology and media studies. Dr. Hill chose ethnography as his qualitative methodological approach because it “emphasizes discovery [and] does not assume answers” (LeCompte & Schensul 2010). This is a concept I have revisited throughout the phases of this study in spite of the changes in my data sources and methodologies.

My original goal for the study was to continue doing ethnographic research by conducting a street fiction workshop at the New York Public Library with youth ages 16–22 (as described in chapter one). The observations I made during Dr. Hill’s study were rich but left much to be discovered, and I wanted to use critical discourse analysis to examine the ways in which participants’ semiosis (or meaning-making) exposed “dialectical” relationships among language, representations, social relations, institutions (like schools), and values and beliefs (Fairclough, 2010, p. 231). During our sessions, I would have gathered a number of texts (transcripts, videos, journals, etc.) that would have served as “points of entry” for me to explore the identities, resources, styles, stances, knowledges and discourses youth use as they read and discuss street fiction texts (Fairclough, 2010, p. 237).

However, *that* study is not *this* one. As I further studied the genre, I began to see another problem my research might be able to help address, namely, that street fiction often seemed to be viewed as a discrete entity rather than a cultural production linked to many other traditions, knowledges, and theories. I also noted that scholarly treatment of street fiction had not yet delved deeply into the themes and issues present in street fiction novels as a way of improving the genre’s contextual frame and developing more fertile ground for the kinds of ethnographic

work I originally intended to conduct. Furthermore, I began to realize that the audience research favored in ethnographic studies does not always lead to the “truth,” or at least that the “truth” asserted in that type of research would be complemented by the reframing and textual analysis I have undertaken here. Asking street fiction readers about their interpretations of the texts would have given me a “representation of reality,” but so would digging deeply into the texts themselves (McKee, 2003, p. 84).

Another facet of the methodology I must highlight here is my identity and my relationship to the material and the producers and consumers of street fiction since it speaks to the reflexivity I bring to the work. As a White woman who grew up in a lower middle-class family in a rural environment during the 1970s and 1980s, I cannot claim to have read street fiction during my youth. Nor can I say I have first-hand knowledge of what it is like to live as a member of a low-income urban community. I cannot directly speak to the intersections of poverty, racism, low social mobility, and lack of educational opportunity that are so important in street fiction novels and in the biographies of many of their authors, other than to say that I have witnessed these forces as they have acted upon the lives of many of my high school students during my teaching career. This might make me seem like an outsider who is without the credentials necessary to offer quality analyses. However, I have tried to make as many inroads as possible to understanding the genre. Though I remain critical of the misogyny, gratuitous violence, and stereotyping present in the texts, I read several street fiction novels that resonate with me on a personal level. Like most readers, I am capable of enjoying many books from the perspectives of protagonists with whom I had little in common biographically, and I do not necessarily need to agree with every aspect of a text to take pleasure in reading it (Hermes, 1995). So it is with street fiction. I argue that my experiences as an educator; my graduate studies

focusing on cultural studies, critical theory, literary theory and literacies; and my willingness to read street fiction with a critical eye and a sense of possibility place me in an excellent position to offer *one* set of analyses. I have made my identities and histories transparent as a part of this study, and I have traced the lines of thought I use to triangulate my conclusions. I leave it to my readers to determine the validity of the work in light of this information and based on the context I provide for street fiction, its fundamental spheres of influence, and its genre-specific dynamics. Furthermore, as a number of methodologists suggest (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002; McKee, 2003) stepping back from one's subject to view it from a distance can prove advantageous as it makes room for fresh, critical readings of the texts. I do not posit myself here as an authority figure who has a last word on the subject of street fiction. Instead, I see my role as an attentive observer of the genre.

Context is an integral component of any study, especially one involving critical discourse analysis. As I reviewed the existing literature on street fiction, I noticed that, while scholars have pointed out some of "rules" of the genre, there is an opportunity to say more about the many tangled roots that frame the novels. Studying the novels discretely without a clear view of their context would not "shed light on the links between texts and societal and cultural processes and structures" (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 66). Fairclough, who provides a theory of critical discourse analysis integral to this work, explains that communication through language takes place three-dimensionally. Any study of the linguistic or thematic features of a text without accounting for how the text is made or consumed and how it fits into social practices fails (Fairclough, 1992b, p. 73). To avoid this pitfall, I began my work here by conducting an in-depth history and genealogy of street fiction (see chapter 2). Thus, the literary, historical and cultural threads I follow in that chapter shape the readings of street fiction I offer in chapter four.

Selection of Texts

I chose four novels for inclusion in this study: *Dirty Red* by Vickie Stringer (2006), *Snow* by Kenji Jasper (2007), *Picture Me Rollin'* by Sofia Quintero (a.k.a. Black Artemis, 2005), and *Animal* by Kwan Foye (2012). The following publisher blurbs for each of the novels gives a sense of the plots and characters:

Dirty Red (2006)

“Mischievous and manipulative, eighteen-year-old Red is an expert at deception with a provocative femininity. She employs her dirty ways - even faking a pregnancy with her boyfriend - to win a closet full of Gucci bags, a deluxe condominium full of baby accessories, a new car, and a book deal. But when one of Red's scams backfires and she winds up truly pregnant by her inmate ex-boyfriend, Bacon, she finds herself in more trouble than she's ever known. The drama truly unravels when Red's picture-perfect cons fall apart due to the power of—surprisingly—love.”

Snow (2007)

From acclaimed author Kenji Jasper comes an edgy, gripping new novel that asks if family life turns a hustler soft--or just hardens his heart...
He Killed For Hate.

Life on the darker streets of D.C. can turn a clean kid grimy. Snow was one of those good kids--until a gang killed his next door neighbor and he decided to settle the score. But doing what he thought was right only plunged him deeper in a deadly game. Now he's a killer for hire, a grown man who's willing--and able--to do anything necessary to survive. But even a cold-blooded hit man has a heart...

Now He May Die For Love.

When Snow falls in love and becomes a father, he's more willing than ever to do what it takes to support his woman and his baby girl. But what that means for a hit man and what it means for a family man are two very different things. When the clash between his home life and his street life threatens to explode, Snow decides to make one last score to put his family on easy street, and get out of the game. But as much as he wants to break out, there's someone just as dangerous, and just as determined to keep Snow right where he is...

Picture Me Rollin' (2005)

In this hardcore novel of love and betrayal, a female ex-con moved by the power, poetry, and dangerous passion of Tupac Shakur has plans to play it straight and do the right thing for her future survival. But her lover Jesus, the man she went to prison for on a gun

possession charge, is intent on bringing her back into his game. She finds herself caught between inescapable yet contradictory forces-the passion for the streets and the inspiration of her conscience, just like her idol Pac. With righteous anger to burn, she's got to pull her life together before it's too late.

Animal (2012)

Three years after narrowly escaping a one way trip to the gas chamber, the fugitive known only as Animal finds himself drawn back to the scene of the crime, Harlem, NY. Throughout his entire time in exile the only thing that kept Animal going was the thought that he would one day be reunited with his soul mate, Gucci, but one bullet changed everything.

When his enemies tried to murder Gucci they crossed the line, so he vowed to cross them all.

While Gucci teeters between life and death Animal sets out on a bloody mission fueled by love and orchestrated by bullets...there would be no more innocents.

Alliances are formed and secrets uncovered while Animal wages his personal war on the streets of Harlem with the end result revealing one great truth....he is only a small piece in a much greater puzzle.

To gain a sense of the genre, I began by reading several street fiction novels from different time periods in their entirety. I then consulted a number of books, news articles, websites, blogs, awards lists, online booksellers, and online book reviews to generate a list of some of the most frequently mentioned and highest ranked street fiction authors. I also considered how the authors situated themselves in the genre (since street fiction is wide-ranging); I thought about what kind of stories the author told and I read several excerpts from their books to get a sense of their writing. I read reader reviews to see how audiences had responded to their work, looking for evidence of “thoughtfulness” in their commentary, even if it was impossible to tell if readers had what Maxine Greene would describe as an “aesthetic experience” from their reading (Greene, 1995, p. 125). Choosing the texts proved to be one of the most challenging aspects of the study because the genre is diverse and I did not want to do an injustice to it by offering too narrow a representation. Ultimately, I settled into the awareness that the novels I selected do not define street fiction, they are simply examples of the genre, or

“typical texts” (Wodak and Meyer, 2016, p.23). No sample as small as the one in this study is sufficient to fully define the genre, but a narrow, purposeful sample supported my priority of deeply analyzing of the texts.

Two other notable changes in my thinking occurred during the process of selecting texts. I originally thought I would choose street fiction novels written by women that were set in New York City. I changed course for a number of reasons. First, within the past five to seven years, I have observed an increase in the number of male authors of street fiction. As I have said elsewhere, the historical data suggests that during the late 1990s and early 2000s, women authors dominated street fiction. However, the gender balance has shifted. To exclude male voices now, given that male authors are among the top-selling, highest-rated novelists in the genre, would inaccurately represent the current landscape of street fiction. Given educators’ goals to encourage strong reading and writing practices in young men (Haddix, 2009; Kirkland and Jackson, 2009), keeping their voices out of the study might also have resulted in a missed opportunity to consider how street fiction might build young men’s literacies (in addition to young women’s). As I opened the field to include male authors’ perspectives, I decided it was less important to keep the locale of the novels consistent and more important to focus on other aspects of the content instead. There is certainly room for studies of street fiction that focus solely on either women or men as authors or readers of street fiction, but given the breadth of the treatment I wanted to give the genre, I did not make gender a limiting factor.

Moving forward in the process of selecting the texts, I began to ask myself questions about the novels that were framed both by my experiences with street fiction readers and writers, and with the scholarly research I had been conducting. Some of the considerations of the novels occurred to me in a web of interrelated questions. I will attempt to capture them here, and

though they may not constitute a complete list of every thought that contributed to the decisions, it does represent my principle reflections:

1. Does the book seem to resonate with readers?

This might seem like a fairly subjective question, and it would be difficult to measure the accuracy of my response. However, after many years guiding students to select books that match their interests and listening to their preferences and reactions to their reading, I tried to attend to my inner voice of experience. This question allowed me to focus my attention on real and imagined readers. Some of the texts I considered seemed to move too slowly at the beginning to keep a reader's attention, had plots that seemed disjointed and frustrating, or had annoying inconsistencies in the narratives that I felt would be deal-breakers for the youth I have known. I chose texts I thought could be appreciated by both dedicated readers of the genre and those who were beginning to acquaint themselves with it. Examining online reviews of the novels at Amazon.com, Goodreads.com, or various street fiction blogs and websites gave me some insight into the reasoning behind readers' ratings of the texts.

2. What can I learn about the author?

In addition to ascertaining whether the author had been public about his or her writing philosophy and attitudes toward street fiction, I tried to choose a balance of men and women who have had a fair amount of writing experience in the genre. While there are some interesting new authors who are beginning to push boundaries in street fiction, I wanted to include authors who have some historical perspective and a proven track record of writing novels and sharing them with audiences. I considered their histories of publishing and distributing their books, and the group of authors included in the study represent a wide range of experiences in that area, from grassroots methods of selling self-published books out of the trunk of a car, to commercial routes

with six figure deals from booksellers. Some of the authors represent a more mainstream popularity, having sold thousands or perhaps hundreds of thousands of books during their careers. Others who may have had less commercial success wrote books that I consider to be representative of some of the most stylistically or thematically dynamic within the genre.

3. What is the novel about?

There are a number of sub-genres within street fiction that in the past decade have gone on to have lives of their own. Among them, I include urban erotica (such as Zane's popular body of work), young-adult street fiction and urban fantasy, to name a few. Other researchers have given significant scholarly attention to urban erotica, young-adult oriented street fiction often reads too "low" for most high-school-aged students I have met (it does not "feel real" to them), and urban fantasy seems different enough to be studied on its own due to science fiction's strong influence over the narratives. Attending to all the variations within these sub-genres would have been beyond the scope of this study, and my ability to attend to them in depth may have been compromised by their wide range of textual features and norms. I did, however, try to choose novels with thematic and stylistic variations. *Dirty Red* is touted as a "cautionary tale" since readers are meant to see the protagonists flaws and learn from them by negative example. It also features two heterosexual relationships which, taken together, raise the questions about the nature and meaning of love. *Picture Me Rollin'* centers on Esperanza's struggle to make a life for herself as an ex-convict. She engages in a quest for self-definition that involves redefining several of her relationships, including the one with her sister, Dulce, and her ex-boyfriend, Jesus. *Snow* is the story of a young man who faces a choice between two lives: the one on the street as a high-powered thief and drug dealer, and the other at home as a loving father and husband. Finally, *Animal* is a lengthy revenge plot featuring a street assassin. In spite of his killer instincts,

Animal has a strong sense of justice and a deep love for his girlfriend, Gucci.

4. Does this novel have themes or messages that extend beyond the narrative?

I was not simply looking for a “street” setting and evidence of violence, sex, and/or drugs in the novels I selected. Instead, using the context I have provided in chapters one and two, I looked for novels that seemed to fit my emerging understanding of the genre. One of the criticisms of street fiction novels I repeatedly encountered (in the eyes of both readers and writers of the genre) is that some of the novels fail to provide any meaningful “food for thought” that propels the narrative and gives the readers something to ponder. Since preliminary research I gathered from readers and authors seemed to point to a general desire for street fiction with a message, I included stories that seem to do so, though I know some novels in the genre focus on other priorities. Each of the protagonists from the novels included in this study faced tensions and contradictions that resisted easy resolution. Lastly, I chose novels rather than collections of poems or autobiographies since the novel is the preferred genre of storytelling for street fiction.

As I mentioned, I knew from the beginning that I wanted to include authors’ voices in the study, and my initial plan was to conduct interviews with authors whose novels appeared in my analyses. I reached out to authors by phone, email, Facebook, and through their publishers, but no one expressed an interest in conducting interviews. Fortunately, many street fiction authors have conducted lengthy interviews about their writing, and their responses are accessible online through websites and podcasts. After reading or listening to several interviews, I began cross-referencing lists of promising novels with lists of authors who had publicly discussed their writing in substantive detail. From this list, I was able to narrow the field to choose the four main texts that are included in this work.

To strengthen my analyses, I felt it necessary to gird my readings of the texts with other

“intertexts” related to the subject matter (McKee, 2003). To that end, I drew upon author interviews taken from a number of websites. Methodologically, this type of textual analysis does not typically privilege the author’s point of view, except in cases where there is “evidence that audiences actually use that information themselves to interpret the text” (McKee, 2003, p. 80). Street fiction fits this exception. Readers of the genre often want to know the authors’ backstories and to learn about what led them into the “publishing game” (Street Fiction.org, 2013). Street fiction websites like streetfiction.org often feature interviews with authors. A sense of intimacy and perceived honesty exists in the relationship between street fiction authors and their readers, and I wanted to honor that implied contract between the two groups by including authors’ voices here. Authors of street fiction, as K’wan Foye noted in one interview, have often read extensively within and outside the genre, and they have been able to observe changes within the genre over time (Ibid.). Though they cannot entirely replace readers’ voices, the street fiction authors included in this study provided a sense of readers’ perspectives, since the authors have expressed the preferences of their readership in multiple interviews. It is important to note that while I respect the authors’ interpretations of their own novels, I do not suggest that their interpretations represent the “truth” in the way the stories can or should be read. There is no single, correct way to read or interpret a novel, and I reject the idea that aligning one’s views with the author’s represents a pinnacle in interpretive achievement. This intentionalist approach to reading novels restricts rather than broadens the lenses through which we might see street fiction, and therefore counters the goals of this study.

Data Sources and Analysis

A number of texts informed this study, both formally through direct quotation and analysis,

and informally as I gathered background information about the reading, writing and production of street fiction. The four novels I analyzed and excerpts and transcriptions of street fiction author interviews were the main “intertexts” that served as my data sources (McKee, 2003, p. 89). I read other street fiction texts to develop a better sense of the range of the genre, and I consulted fan websites to learn more about trends in street fiction and audience reception of texts. Websites that include book reviews from customers like Amazon.com were also useful in thinking about the preferences of readers and the “rules” of the genre. Since these intertexts are targeted to the readers of street fiction, they open up a window onto the worldview, discourses, and meaning-making practices espoused by and integrated into the genre. Additionally, I used the data sources to create new texts that supported the research process, such as theoretical notes and data analysis memos. The collection of data was not a discrete phase of the study, rather there was a continual process of analysis and revisitation of data to check for key concepts and expand or restructure my thinking. Throughout this process, new questions arose which required me to revisit the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

After reading the core novels multiple times, I typed excerpts from them and wrote commentaries including questions and observations that arose during my readings. I then juxtaposed relevant theories and research outlined in chapter two with the novels, eventually extending the connections to include the transcripts of author interviews as I traced recurring patterns, ideas, contradictions, or themes in the discourses. Fairclough (2010) writes: “There are no ‘right answers’ to the question of which theoretical perspectives to draw upon: it is a matter of researchers’ judgments about which perspectives can provide a rich theorisation as a basis for defining coherent objects for critical research which can deepen understanding of the processes at issue, their implications for human well-being and the possibilities for improved

well-being” (p. 236). In keeping with his statement, I do not suggest that my readings are the only right ones. However, they are grounded in theory and experience, and they are bounded by explicit frames documented in the research.

Though I had originally thought I would do more word or sentence-level analysis of the street fiction texts included in this study, I quickly realized that I would need to look at larger thematic units centering on the dialogical relationships in the texts. I concerned myself primarily with “relations between words and longer expressions [...] and over larger stretches of text” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 36). Therefore, the analysis I conducted focused on the “semantic relations” among texts rather than the “grammatical,” “lexical,” or “phonological” relations among them (Ibid.).

I employed Fairclough’s concepts of intertextuality and interdiscursivity to think about how discourses are recapitulated and/or changed within and across street fiction texts. Using these tools, I attended to “how different discourses are articulated together in one particular text and whether the same discourses are articulated together across a series of texts or whether different discourses are combined in new articulations” (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 139). Laclau and Mouffe’s work on discourse theory was also essential to my way of discerning patterns from the texts. Their work on subject positions, identity and representation helped me think about the “I,” the “we,” and the “they” implicit in street fiction as signaled in the discourses in the texts. Laclau and Mouffe’s notions of hegemonic discourse and the struggles among discourses were valuable lenses through which I considered the contradictions within street fiction and its relationship to other orders of discourse outside the genre (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 47–48).

When it comes to discourse analysis, Jorgensen and Phillips recommend looking for the

following relationships in texts: “1) the aspects of the world to which the discourses ascribe meaning; 2) the particular ways in which each of the discourses ascribes meaning; 3) the points on which there is an open struggle between different representations; and 4) any understandings naturalised in all of the discourses as common-sense” (2002, p. 144–145). Their framework was particularly helpful in maintaining a multi-faceted way of looking at interstices in street fiction texts.

Media and cultural studies lent me still other lenses through which I considered street fiction, including ideological analysis, genre analysis and rhetorical analysis. “Ideology may be understood as the dominant ideas of an individual, group, class or society, the way meanings are socially produced, or even as the false ideas upon which a social, political or economic system is based” (Brennen, 2012, p. 201). Ideological aspects are woven into and through street fiction to represent a certain view of the world and the way it works. Unpacking ideologies helps to show how issues of race, ethnicity, class, age and gender play into street fiction narratives, and how these positions reify and or resist dominant discourses. In his book *Ideology*, Mike Cormack (1995) discusses five elements of ideology one must consider when doing textual analysis: content, structure, absence, style and mode of address. The tropes, motifs and characterizations of people and events in street fiction reflect social realities and fantastic elements that create an ideological foundation for the genre. The way the plots are structured gives us a clue about the expectations of street fiction readers and the way they see the world around them. Though less obvious at first glance than Cormack’s other elements, absence is of critical importance in textual analysis of street fiction because it exposes the genre’s boundaries. Stylistic features include everything from the covers of the books, the size and style of the font to the manner of storytelling and language in the texts. These features feed into the expectations of readers and

connect the genre to other orders of discourse. Finally, the mode of address figures prominently in street fiction; especially when considering the way the “insider” relationship is shared by authors and readers.

Ideological analysis overlaps with genre analysis in significant ways since “within each genre there are narrative and aesthetic conventions that reproduce and reinforce a system of beliefs about our social reality” (Brennan, 2012, p. 204). As much as I find it impossible to completely encapsulate the genre of street fiction, attempts to uncover its central elements led me closer to understanding the social and political forces at work in the texts. Finally, the question of *modality* in the genre—how accurately the stories reflect reality—was a central consideration since there is so much controversy about the degree to which the fictional representation of illicit behavior negatively influences real-life actions and attitudes of its readers.

Though I used all of these analytical tools in the study, I did not use each in isolation. They often blended together in my analysis since there is considerable overlap among them. For instance, one page of a street fiction novel might feature exchanges between characters that featured makers of intertextuality, multiple discourses at play and ideological components challenging hegemonic discourses and presenting a particular perspective on race and gender. In subsequent chapters I break the analyses up across various themes to most efficiently capture my observations, but I must note that the moments I parse out in my analyses are often multivalent and complex.

This process gave me room to notice “transdisciplinary” moments where I might draw upon and synthesize knowledge and theories from various fields to analyze and theorize from my observations (Fairclough 2010, p. 235). I conducted a critical discourse analysis of the interviews as a way of mapping the “interdiscursive” elements of our dialogue (Fairclough 2010, p. 237).

The author commentaries, then, allowed me to better understand the parameters and characteristics of the genre, and to delve more deeply into the “emerging themes” coming from my readings of street fiction (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Once I had chosen the authors/texts, I researched the author’s lives, studied their novel(s), and read street fiction fan sites and reviews to see how their work was received by their readers. Though some these intertexts are not included in the study directly, they did provide important background information for my readings, encouraging me toward a broader range and depth of questioning.

Assumptions/Limitations of the Study

Like any researcher, I bring many assumptions to the work I do. I will try to name the most relevant assumptions here to make them visible to the reader. First, this study theoretically and methodologically rests on the assumption that language both describes and constitutes our experiences in the world. Street fiction texts, then, both describe and create a particular way of living in and seeing the world around us. Because of this, there are political, cultural and social ramifications that necessitate the study of street fiction. In education, two such ramifications are 1) making space in English classrooms for stories that resonate with the students the American educational system so often laments failing, and 2) connecting street fiction with possible audiences outside of socioeconomically disadvantaged urban communities of color to broaden the reach of its perspectives. I believe that part of how we create change in society is to welcome new voices into our lives through literature. There have been many historical cases in which literature has challenged dangerous hegemonic ideas. Therefore, people outside of the usual community of readers street fiction addresses can benefit from understanding the “sense-making cultures” in which it was created (McKee, 2002, p. 14). New dialogues about racialized social

inequities are currently taking place in every aspect of American life—from law enforcement and health care, to housing, finance and education. I can think of no better time than the present to look critically at a body of writing that opens a window to simultaneously the most fantastic and realistic aspects of life in socioeconomically marginalized urban communities.

This genre is not automatically “bad” simply because of illicit content, the criminal or racial background of some its authors, or the milieu in which it is composed, produced or sold. While street fiction draws upon other discourses, it is not derivative. It offers something different and intriguing enough to its readers to make it worthy of attention. It challenges hegemonic definitions of literature, and it may mark a “change in discursive structures” that merits scholarly inquiry (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p, 139). Though I have linked African-American literature and street fiction, it is important to know that I recognize distinctions between them. With time and approval of critics and audiences, it is possible for some street fiction novels to “cross over” into what is considered African-American literature, and I would argue that novels such as *Push* have done so. But street fiction is a specific genre with key parameters, while African-American literature refers to a much larger body of texts with markedly greater variety that have been curated over time. While I do not wish to enter a debate about what is or is not *literature*, I am willing to discuss the *literary features* of the street fiction texts I have selected for this study.

The study is naturally delimited by the spheres of influence I have described in chapter two since those discourses comprise the context for street fiction as I have defined it. Other researchers might view street fiction through different lenses and find alternate themes and implications in their readings. This is one of the chief methodological challenges of textual analysis—the meaning I make from a set of texts may differ from the meaning someone else

makes. However, I have carefully crafted my assertions about street fiction to make them reasonable to a wide readership both from inside and outside the discursive community. Because the analytical tools available to critical discourse analysis favors depth rather than breadth, I have not included a vast number of street fiction texts in this study. Though this critical reading of a handful of representative street fiction novels does not cover all the variations present in the genre, it should be grounded enough to provide insights that are useful when thinking about the multifaceted semiotic possibilities and pedagogical applications of the texts. My set of interpretations, though I have made them as thorough and exacting as possible, can never be passed off as the “right” way to read street fiction. In tracing my line of thought, my goal is to convince the reader that my assertions are reasonable. To test the quality of my assertions, I used Jorgensen and Phillips’ (2002) three-point criteria for textual analyses. They suggest analyses must be *solid*, meaning any interpretation that is offered must be “based on a range of different textual features”; it must be *comprehensive*, meaning that I attempt to fully answer my research questions and “that conflict with the analysis should be accounted for”; and it must be *transparent*, meaning that interpretations are documented so that the reader has access to enough material to retrace the analysis (Jorgenson and Phillips, 2002, p. 177).

While discourse analysis is a useful tool when investigating issues of power and social worlds, critical scholars in this field call for care in selecting texts for study and responsibility in framing the context of the discourse. To minimize the possibility of misrepresenting research, they recommend ethnography as a method of accounting for context. As Fairclough (1992, p. 215) asserts: “one really needs to engage in social and ethnographic research over significant periods of time in particular institutional settings, gathering and analyzing textual samples and information on social and cognitive aspects of their production and interpretation as a part of this

more broadly defined research.” During the pilot study, I developed a deeper sense of the context in which communicative exchanges transpired than if I had simply analyzed transcripts of conversations for linguistic features. The embeddedness I felt during the pilot enhanced my ability to understand the data from this study, and it allowed me to test my assumptions and assertions against those of a community of readers. However, a stronger ethnographic component to this study would have contributed to the efficacy of this research. It is my hope that the work I have done here will provide a platform other studies may be able to use in crafting ethnographic research involving street fiction.

Although it has been a privilege to study street fiction for such an extensive period, time is still a significant limitation to this study. With additional time, I could have engaged a greater number of texts, included more authors, or added a dimension involving the audience reception of street fiction. I could have investigated additional spheres of influence, such as street fictions connections to the worlds of Blaxploitation films of the 1970s and the New Black realism films of the 1990s (Bausch, 2013). While I have done my best to grapple with it here, I cannot map the entire order of discourse associated with street fiction. The genre is dynamic because of the constant interaction among readers, authors, texts and discourses that shape the social practices surrounding it, and I can never entirely pin it down. I offer the best study I can of street fiction at this moment with an awareness that the durability of my findings may be limited by the genre’s evolution. The goal of this project is to develop an analysis that may contribute to a more nuanced view of the order of discourse espoused by street fiction.

Chapter Four: Discursive Dynamics in Street Fiction

In this chapter, I use critical discourse analysis and cultural studies perspectives to discuss some of the core themes, tensions, and positions central to four examples of street fiction novels. I begin with a discussion of the existential ambivalence demonstrated when characters must choose between hustling on the streets and various versions of “legitimate” livelihoods. In the repeating pattern of this unpalatable choice, I see a collision between the counterculture of the street and the dominant American culture. This ambivalence sets the stage for complex representations of the self and the “other” in street fiction which complicate, resist, and sometimes reinforce stereotypical notions of ’hood lives. The final trope I consider in this chapter is the unique interplay between the “real” and fantasy in street fiction. I trace some of the sociologically grounded situations presented in street fiction while also examining the power and function of imaginative departures from the “real world”.

Street Fiction as Resistance: Ambivalence Toward the Straight Life/Street Life

bell hooks is neither the first nor last scholar to observe that White Americans of European descent built the United States using tools of oppression. She states: “I believe that Black experience has been and continues to be one of internal colonialism” (hooks, 1994, p.148), Subjugation of both African slaves and Native Americans was integral to the formation of the United States. hooks' assertion echoes Toni Morrison's analysis of the formation of American identity by “othering” those who do not fit the White, Christian, heterosexual, masculine mold. The grim legacy of slavery, born from colonial dominion of European nations over African nations, carried forward in inequitable political, economic and social relationships among Black and brown populations that contributed to the formation of racialized ghettos in American cities

in the 20th century (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). In this colonial system, equity among White Americans is achieved through the systematic marginalization of Black and Latinx people through the pervasiveness of White privilege (Jackson, 2009, p. 163). It is precisely this oppression that the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s attempted to address in its call for Black nationalism and the advancement of a Black Aesthetic. As Larry Neal wrote: “Black people, however dispersed, constitute a nation within the belly of White America” (Neal, 1968, p. 197). From this nationalistic starting point, scholars and activists associated with the Black Arts movement railed against the “protest literature” written by their predecessors during the Harlem Renaissance (Jones, 1966), and called on Black artists and writers to speak directly (if not solely) to Black audiences, thereby reducing the pressure of the oppressive forces of western cultures on people’s lives (Jones, 1966; Neal, 1968; Fuller, 1968; Gayle, Jr., 1971; Fabio, 1971; Lee, 1971). They called for a Black audience “that must see itself and the world in terms of its own interests” (Jones, 1966, p. 197).

While Black Arts artists, scholars, and activists centered their efforts on the development of a Black Aesthetic for the masses in Black communities, they simultaneously acknowledged that the oppressiveness of Whiteness and western culture was detrimental for Americans of all racial identities. In his criticism of Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son*, James Baldwin wrote of the toxic, dehumanizing colonial relationship present in the text, ultimately calling for literature that allows people to recognize the humanity in one another: “And, indeed, within this web of lust and fury, Black and White can only thrust and counterthrust, long for each other's slow, exquisite death; death by torture, acid, knives and burning; the thrust, the counterthrust, the longing making the heavier that cloud which blinds and suffocates them both, so that they go down into the pit together. Thus has the cage betrayed us all, this moment, our life, turned to

nothing through our terrible attempts to insure it” (Baldwin, 1955b; p. 155). A little more than a decade later, African-American editor and critic Hoyt Fuller wrote: “The facts of Negro life accuse White people. In order to look at Negro life unflinchingly, the White viewer either must relegate it to the realm of the subhuman, thereby justifying an attitude of indifference, or else the White viewer must confront the imputation of guilt against him. And no man who considers himself humane wishes to admit complicity in crimes against the human spirit” Fuller, 1968, p. 201–202). Baldwin and Fuller’s words seem prophetic in light of the way subsequent art forms like hip-hop, which in part speaks to Black and brown urban oppression in America, resonated with audiences across racial and cultural identities. This point is important to street fiction, since one question that remains to be answered about the genre is how far its readership extends.

In forming its national identity, then, America “othered” another nation into existence, and it is this nation that speaks through hip-hop and through street fiction. In his 1964 essay entitled “Harlem Is Nowhere”, Ralph Ellison delved into the bleak psychological world of the urban ghetto. He described how the exodus from the South to northern cities created an existential crisis in the identities of Black people.

For this is a world in which the major energy of the imagination goes not into creating works of art, but to overcome the frustrations of social discrimination. Not quite citizens and yet Americans, full of the tensions of modern man, but regarded as primitives, Negro Americans are in desperate search for an identity. Rejecting the second-class status assigned to them, they feel alienated and their whole lives have become search for answers to the questions: Who am I, What am I, Why am I, and Where? Significantly, in Harlem the reply to the greeting “How are you?” is very often, “Oh, man, I’m *‘nowhere’*—a phrase revealing an attitude so common that it has been reduced to a gesture, a seemingly trivial word.[...]The phrase “I’m nowhere” expresses the feeling borne in upon many Negroes that they have no stable, recognized place in society. One’s identity drifts in a capricious reality in which even the most commonly held assumptions are questionable. One “is” literally, but one is nowhere; one wanders in a ghetto maze, a “displaced person” of American democracy. (55-56)

Ellison expounds the tensions, conflicts and human dilemma of living in the ghetto, and

in doing so, he places its residents in a zone simultaneously outside and within American democracy, leading to a sense of alienation and fragmentation. The displacement becomes a unifying and creative force in and of itself. The social and political forces that isolated many poor and working-class Black and brown youth in America's cities contributed to the formation of a "nation" with its own language, worldview, and culture (Collins, 2006; Watkins, 2001; Stapleton, 1998). Hip-hop showed the world that the 'hood is social, political, and geographic home to this nation, and regardless of the racial identities of its members, urban Black youth culture's vernacular is the language that corresponds to this set of social and political positionalities (Dimitriadis, 1996; Foreman, 2002; George, 2004). When Bakari Kitwana coined the term "hip hop nation" during the 1990s (Kitwana, 2002) he understood that the "nation" spoke to a shared set of perspectives and experiences that transcended any one marker of identity (such as race). Part of what the project of hip-hop did was to reclaim "nowhere" and make it "somewhere," and it was so successful in harnessing some of the creative force present in the 'hood that now elements of the culture can be found everywhere, especially where there is a sense of injustice regarding an imbalance of power (Pennycook & Mitchell, 2009; Osumare, 2001). Street fiction occupies some of the territory hip-hop and its Black Arts progenitors established. Though it sits in a structurally subordinate position in relationship to mainstream America, 'hood nation acts as a powerful mirror reflecting on basic U.S. tenets, showing the flaws in the nation's democratic, meritocratic promises of equality.

As a literature of resistance, street fiction sometimes functions in the same ways other bodies of postcolonial literature do. Many Americans revel the country's founding myths of equality and freedom, and some scorn narratives that do not fit this fantasy. 70% of Millennials, 86% of Gen-Xers, 91% of Baby Boomers consider themselves "patriotic" (Reilly, 2013), and a

full 81% of people who identify themselves politically “Business Conservatives” say that they often feel “proud to be an American,” whereas only 40% of those who call themselves “Solid Liberals” say the same (Pew Research Center, 2014). Unsurprisingly, 65% of people view themselves as “typical Americans” (Ibid.). In this polarized climate concerning American nation identity, discussions of the shortcomings of capitalism are often branded unpatriotic or “socialist” (Tupy, 2016). People reject actions that call on them to acknowledge that all citizens do not have equal opportunity or equal protection under the law, as the controversy over San Francisco 49ers player Colin Kaepernick’s silent protest during the national anthem showed (Powell, 2016). Many who call themselves patriots want to believe America is a post-racial nation where “all lives matter” (Yancy & Butler, 2015), yet these comments are merely a reinvention of the same racism and colonialism that have haunted the nation since its inception. Street fiction stories have the potential to resist hegemonic victory narratives of democracy, meritocracy and capitalism. The characters of street fiction novels are among the “subaltern” as they have few opportunities for social mobility (Spivak, 1999, p. 28). Yet through street fiction novels have a powerful opportunity to critique American power relationships from a uniquely insider/outsider vantage point “for it has been, and always will be, the case that the most important forms of resistance to any form of social power will be produced from within the communities that are most immediately and visibly subordinated by that power structure” (Slemon, 1990, p.103). Though I do not wish to suggest that street fiction novels always speak truth to power, the opportunity to do so is open to writers in the genre. Some authors, like the ones included in this study, express a desire to speak out against oppression in their work. They write stories with characters who, though they are fictional, testify in real ways to the United States’ hypocrisies. Thus, street fiction authors how adopt these positions in relation to the dominant culture take stances similar

to those of postcolonial writers.

When street fiction novels actively resist American hegemony, they still cannot entirely escape connections to the dominant culture. Even within stories that aim to critique inequities, characters show that they are tangled in a complex relationship with the worlds they inhabit. Pointing to ways street fiction talks back to dominant discourses in America only tells half of the story. As agents of both American culture and 'hood culture, there is ambivalence in street fiction authors' representations of themselves, their communities, and the world around them. If "literary resistance is necessarily in a place of ambivalence; between systems, between discursive worlds, implicit and complicit in both of them" (Slemon, 1990, p. 105), street fiction embodies these tensions. I see evidence of this ambivalence in the seduction of the outlaw versus straight-and-narrow approach to life which is a recurrent trope I observed in the novels. In *Picture Me Rollin'*, Esperanza wants desperately to avoid entangling herself with the criminal activity that landed her in jail, yet she also dreads the powerlessness and uncertainty she feels as she tries to work, get her GED, and handle the requirements of her parole. She is simultaneously drawn toward and repulsed by her magnetic yet controlling former boyfriend, Jesus, and the criminal life he wants her to rejoin. Esperanza gets a job at McDonald's, bottling up her dignity, pride, and self-worth to serve ungrateful customers at the behest of a repugnant boss. Here, Esperanza ponders her feelings about her job:

[...] People stooped to jobs like these not only to survive, she figured, but to prove to themselves and everyone else that they were contributing members of society and whatnot. Now that she had spent two weeks here, Esperanza did not understand how that could be. If she did not show up tomorrow, no one would miss her. Another girl—maybe a newly arrived *mejicana* or *dominicana* lucky enough to get the right papers—would take it to help her family. At least that girl had some purpose. At least she would matter, her life had some meaning. For Esperanza this job did nothing to make her feel self-sufficient and law-abiding. It only reminded her each day of how little consequence she

was. Instead of beeping her awake in the morning, her alarm clock might as well yell *Get up, bitch, 'cause you ain't shit*. That would kill her much faster than the monotony if Luciano did not move her to something better soon. For this shit Esperanza could have stayed in prison. (79)

Though it is meant to make her feel like a “contributing member of society,” Esperanza’s job erases her identity and makes her feel as inconsequential as she felt in prison. She feels pressure to maintain legitimate employment in spite of the low wages, long hours, and the demeaning nature of her work. She is capable of doing a more challenging, better paying job, but no one will hire her because she is an ex-convict (a fact she must disclose on every application). Her old life of criminality repeatedly tempts her, in part because of the quick money she could make if she returned, but also because it gives her a sense of self-assuredness; she often longs for the greater sense of prestige and agency she had before her stint behind bars. Her identity and her talents mattered then, and she had a distinct purpose. She is caught in the gravities of two worlds—one of mainstream American culture, its laws and expectations, the other of the street. Neither is entirely comfortable for Esperanza, and her ambivalence shows in the contrasting portrait she draws between herself and a “newly arrived” immigrant. The contrast underscores the different relationships Esperanza and an immigrant have to power as it is framed in the United States. Esperanza is supposed to be able to call herself an American citizen, yet her layers of outsider-ness in relationship to the dominant culture (ex-convict status, Afro-Latina, urban woman of low-socioeconomic status, low level of formal education, etc.) bar her from full participation in that society.

Esperanza’s feels her former life tugging at her most intensely when she is near her ex-boyfriend, Jesus, but she is fully aware of the dangerous consequences that come from giving herself over to it (and to him). Esperanza knows that resuming her life of crime could

compromise her relationship with her sister, land her in jail again, or even result in her death, but at least in her street life she might feel a greater sense of power, no matter how fleeting or illusory. When Feli, one of Jesus's buddies, asks Esperanza to go to a barbecue, she declines, not only because she knows it would jeopardize her parole, but because she also knows that Feli is beneath her, and she is still drawn to Jesus. Esperanza says: " 'Don't be mad at me, Feli. It's not that I don't want to hang out with you. I had mad fun today, more fun than I've had in a long time.' And she meant it. [...] If Feli ever cut loose from Jesus and his crew, she would consider going out with him, at least once or twice. [...] But if Feli insisted on rolling with them, she couldn't give him any play. Besides, Esperanza was Jesus's ex. *Jesus's ex*. If a woman was gonna mess with a man in the game, you didn't get down with a Feli if you could land a Jesus. [...] Esperanza could have Jesus if she wanted him. 'It's not you, it's the whole parole thing. If not for that I would go.' How much she wanted to go" (Black Artemis, 2005, p. 149–150). There is no easy resolution of this ambivalence for Esperanza, and in the end of the novel, she chooses to extricate herself from the pull of these two poles by moving to Cuba after shooting Jesus and his enemies when a drug deal goes wrong. She steps outside of the ambivalence toward both worlds by escaping to a communist country, following in the footsteps of Assata Shakur, the well-known activist and member of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army who was accused of killing a New Jersey state trooper in 1973 (Shakur, 2001).

Esperanza's escape to Cuba marks a turning point in her consciousness where she recognizes that to fight the dominant culture is to accept the adversarial relationship it offers. Gloria Anzaldua calls this position of contrariness a "counter stance." She writes:

A counter stance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of

violence. The counter stance refutes the dominant culture's view and beliefs, and, for this, it is proudly defiant. All reaction is limited by and dependent on, what it is reacting against. Because the counter stance stems from a problem with authority—outer as well as inner—it's a step towards liberation from cultural domination. But it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react. (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 209)

As much as she is drawn to both worlds, Esperanza ultimately refuses the rewards and pressures of being an upstanding, law-abiding citizen, and of the criminal life Jesus offers. Her choice lessens the power both worlds have over her; she is no longer fully bonded to either of them and she no longer accepts the stories these two worlds tell her about herself—she begins to take charge of the arc of her own narrative. By stepping outside the conflict she feels with both worlds, Esperanza changes the game by opening up a new option beyond the straight life/street life binary. She converts the tensions of her ambivalence toward both paths into a source of power. As she makes a new path for herself apart from the two rigid options she faces, Esperanza breaks the spell both street culture and the dominant American culture have over her.

Another instance of ambivalence in the face of the straight world/street world binary occurs in *Dirty Red*. Here, Red hustles her way toward a real estate license so she can have a legitimate job once she quits “the game.”

Red had gone to real estate school for six weeks the summer after she graduated from high school. With her realtor's license, she was able to make her own hours and do some really good deals that brought a nice profit. After the first year, she decided that working, whether it be for a couple of hours a week or not, was not for her.

She liked being in control, not having to depend on anyone but herself. And the way she saw it, tricking was just like selling real estate. She had a possible buyer who was interested in what she had to offer and it was her job to convince him that he had to have it---all of it. Before long, the guy signed on the dotted line and she had walked away

with his cash and, in some cases, his heart. Red robbed most of her victims blind: she left her victims tricked out of whatever it was she wanted or needed at the time. She prided herself on being ten times smarter than anyone around her. She thought five steps ahead and always had a backup plan.

Her real estate license was current so at any time, she could go back to working anywhere in the state of Michigan. She also had connections with a title company and a Realtor's office, so it always looked like she had a broker and things were right with the paperwork. (36)

Red is heavily invested in her life on the streets. She is a sex worker, and while that is not a legal or legitimate job in the eyes of mainstream American society, Red claims she is not having sex for money because no other options are available to her. She says she chooses sex work because it is lucrative, and she repeatedly delights in the power and control she derives from it. What is striking about her narrative here is that she describes transferring the skills and knowledge she used as a realtor to sex work, even as she maintains the option of returning back to real estate since she keeps her license up-to-date. Red takes power in moving skills across the boundaries between the two worlds she occupies, even though they sit at odds with each other. Her ambivalence is a source of power because she uses it to navigate both the legitimate world of real estate and the street; she keeps doors to both worlds open so she can maximize her opportunities. Ambivalence sometimes connotes weakness, and one usually thinks of marginalization as having a negative effect on the marginalized. But here, Red delights in playing in the margins; she repackages her shrewdness to suit the occasion and setting.

In spite of the generally empowering portrayal, other moments in the story contradict Red's construal as a strong character. The novel vacillates in its attitude towards Red's ruthlessness. At times, she seems heroic for her keen ability to manipulate other people to get what she wants, while on other occasions, Red is portrayed as a villainous sociopath motivated predominantly by self-interest and revenge. In the following scene, Q, who is both a target of

Red's scams and her main love interest, becomes suspicious of her. Q visits his trusted friend, Ms. Foxy, a transgender sex worker who has helped him sell drugs in the past, to find out more about Red's history. Ms. Foxy tells him:

"Okay. That scandalous bitch been pulling game over every muthafuckin nigga who's crossed her path, and some bitches, too. She been in da streets causing all kinds of havoc.

Q, this chick name Lisa found out that Red was stealing checks from people around the way and threatened to tell if she didn't cut her in on the scheme. Red wasn't having that shit, so she set up a trap for Lisa's ass. She got her nigga, Hulla, to act like he was interested in Lisa and had him take her to this construction site as if he was gonna cut her in on the scheme. When Red pulled up on the scene, Hulla grabbed Lisa and tied her up with rope and put tape over her mouth. Red approached saying, 'Bitch, don't you ever try to blackmail me.' Hulla then poured cement all over Lisa's legs. It took two days before someone found her. Lisa was so scared she refused to tell the authorities who did that shit to her." [...]

"*What!* Red did that shit to Lisa? She can't even walk no more."

"That shit ain't all. Red poured gasoline in that nigga Stiny's brand-new Lexus 450 cause he was kissing on another girl in the club when he was supposed to be with her. She watched that shit burn completely up as she smoked a cigarette, laughing.

She got pissed at one of her girls, Candy, so she decided to use her real estate skills to sell that bitch's home while posing as her. That bitch came back from vacation to another family living in her home. Red kicked her ass and dared her to go to the authorities. Candy was homeless on the streets with only her luggage from her trip." (Stringer 2006, p. 168)

As fantastic as all of these accounts of Red's actions may seem out of context, in light of her other acts of revenge in the story, they seem entirely plausible for her character. Through the majority of the novel, Red is cast as either a savvy "conquerer" (Ibid, p. 20), or a "stanky bitch" (Ibid., p. 169). However, ambivalence toward this polarized construction of Red's character emerges later in the novel. After it is revealed that Red is a victim of abuse, the reader is offered a way out of the hero/villain binary through the choice to see Red as an emotionally broken person, whose past victimization results in her incapability of caring for anyone but herself. One sees evidence of this third attitude toward Red in the following scene at the end of the novel. Q, who has dissolved his relationship with Red, sees her car in a church parking lot, and he

enters the building to find her praying. Red asks for his forgiveness, and he refuses. He says:

“Red, there was no need for the b.s. I really cared for you and all you could think about was scheming.”

“Q, you’re right again. I didn’t know any other way. I did what I thought I needed to do.”

“What do you mean by that? Why are you repeating yourself?” Q mumbled as he heaved a deep sigh.

“Q, because my life was fucked. I went through hell living with my mother and her boyfriend. That nigga hurt me. All y’all niggas hurt me. I did what I thought I needed to do to protect myself. You have no idea what it’s like, thinking you have no one to depend on.”

“Yeah, I do, the streets do it to you all the time, but Red, I ain’t the streets!”

“Do the streets let your mother’s boyfriend fuck you and then have your mother tell you that you are lying? Do the streets allow you own mother to not even be three for you and to deny what is happening? I know I’ve done some crazy things, but hurt people hurt people.” Stringer, 2006, p. 217)

Red’s assertion that “hurt people hurt people” is an attempt at making a new possibility for Red from the ambivalence between categorizing Red as either good or evil. This third option of seeing her as a damaged person whose flaws result from the combination of her actions and her circumstances is a maneuver away from the limitations of that binary. From a feminist standpoint, there are a number of critiques I could offer about any redemption afforded to Red at this moment in the novel. For instance, Red lacks the power to transcend her own problems, and that it is only the love of the good man that “saves” her from herself. Equally problematic is the issue that the end of the novel is unclear as to whether Red attempts to apologize to Q by returning the money she stole from him because of her desire to regain his affection, or her willingness to do right for right’s sake. However, the third option opens up in the narrative allows for an ambivalent view of her character. One can love Red, hate her, and sympathize with her all at once, making room for unresolved tensions and contradictions. Red’s story is far-fetched and filled with fantasy throughout, but I believe it is this ambivalence toward her

character that contributes to humanizing her and making the novel feel “real.”

Ambivalence toward the straight life/street life is the driving force in the narrative for Kenji Jasper’s novel *Snow*, which draws its title from the alias of the protagonist, Andre. With his two names comes two selves he attempts to reconcile throughout the story: one the loving father and husband, and the second, a drug dealer and gangster who kills, steals and hustles for a living. Snow’s bifurcation is the heart of the story; it is the key tension in the plot. In the early pages of the novel, Snow tells the reader why he has chosen to run the streets of Washington, D.C., instead of pursuing a socially acceptable job:

“It ain’t that I wanted to be selling death for cash. But I wanted to be free, free from all the jobs I watched my mama working, all the white faces that haunted her dreams with all the work they had for her to do for a check that never got us out of the projects. I didn’t ever want to get up before the sun did. And I never ever wanted anybody tellin’ me what I had to do. For all of that, the streets were the only thing that seemed to make sense. And by using all that I’d learned, by keeping my eyes open and my head clear as water, I’d actually made it to twenty-five.” (4)

From the first moments of the story, the author emphasizes Snow’s awareness of the consequences of his choices on himself and those around him; Snow is no one’s fool. This is evident in Snow’s insistence that he doesn’t want to “be selling death for cash,” showing he understands the negative impact his actions have on his neighborhood. Like half of America’s youth of color living in underserved communities, he does not expect to live to see his 30s (Warner and Swisher, 2015) due to skyrocketing rates of homicide and mass incarceration. Contrary to popular portrayals of the “gangsta,” Snow is not focused solely on money, but rather, his freedom. He longs to be free from the prisons of race and class that define his experience of the ’hood. He fears succumbing to the oppressive control of “white faces” like those who lorded over his mother in her dead-end jobs that kept his family locked in poverty, just like the 9.5 million other Americans who are classified as the “working poor” (Bureau of Labor Statistics,

2014). He means to resist the oppressive authority of the dominant culture over his life. The streets are “the only thing that seemed to make sense” to him because his strong sense of self causes him to reject any world in which he would be permanently objectified, such as the world of the dominant American culture. For the dominant culture to make sense to Snow, he would have to accept the diminished selfhood and possibilities that world holds for him.

By choosing to live on a threshold between the bliss of his domestic life and the harsh world of the street, Snow pushes back against society’s definition of him, and he uses ambivalence to carve a path for himself maintaining access to both worlds. Yet, the psychological toll of functioning as two selves is ultimately more than Snow can bear, and he escapes D.C. with his family and starts a new life in Chicago as the owner of a car wash. At the end of the novel after nearly a decade has passed, he finds out that Ray, one of his oldest and most trusted friends, has been killed. His instincts tell him that something from his past is back to haunt him, and the safety and banality of his “straight” life is shattered. The illusion of his full participation in the dominant culture is emphasized in one of the book’s final moments:

My first impulse is to grab my daughter and pack a bag for both of us and check into a hotel for the rest of the weekend. If I do that, Thai comes to an empty house and it’s back to car washing come Monday morning when I’m due back. Things are simple now, and safe. No surprises. No threats. [...]

But my soul can’t even let those thoughts finish. No matter where I go, I’m a nigga from Shaw, and Ray and Thai and E were the ones who always had my back. Something tells me there was something inside, just below the surface of all our fallen homies, something that has to do with our past, something that started with Ray but is heading straight for us, something we can’t run from. But we can go to war. That’s what I do, after all.

Instead of going up to Kayi I go down to that basement. The Sigs [guns] are sealed in a metal box beneath the circuit breakers. The combination is Adele’s birthday. As I get the steel in my palms, it feels like seven years has been a day. I feel like a killer again, and I can’t tell yet if that’s a good or a bad thing. (Jasper, 2007, p. 129-130)

The image in this final scene of the novel is highly symbolic. The guns locked away in

the basement of his home represent the ambivalent life he left behind seven years ago. By unlocking the box, Snow restores the power that was available to him when he walked between two worlds. Snow knows he has the option to leave his house once he hears the news about Thai, thereby preserving the straight life he has constructed for himself and his family. However, he chooses ambivalence once again over the certainty and security of his new life. Snow knows that no matter how stable his life seems to be, he will always be “a nigga from Shaw.” That brief declaration exposes his belief that American society will always see him as a second-class citizen, and that there is no escaping the power structures that lock him into a subordinate position. However, it can also be read a statement proudly owning Shaw as a part of himself; a powerful source of his identity. Snow does not lock his street origins into either a positive or a negative construction, as the ambiguity of his statement demonstrates. For emphasis of his ambivalence, the novel ends without branding him as either “good” or “bad,” though it is certain that he had reclaimed his role as a killer.

The resolution of the straight life/street life conundrum lingers on the horizon of these narratives as an absurd “choice.” The characters’ alterity as members of the world of the streets often renders full participation in the “legitimate” world untenable. In many novels, the characters seem pinned into position by dominant American culture, and their membership in the ’hood marks them as “other.” However, with “otherness” sometimes comes identity and pride—a feeling of belonging, or a sense of independence. Identities, affiliations, ego, desire, socioeconomic pressures, and lack of mobility intervene in characters’ vacillations between the street life and the straight life, and both paths have positive and negative consequences. The novels suggest that no matter how much “rugged individualism” the characters in these novels exude, their brand of savvy and grit is not valued by mainstream American society the way it is

in the streets. America romanticizes and valorizes determination, strategic thinking, and “street smarts” most often when they are shrouded with markers of status and respectability like high school and college diplomas, work experience in Fortune 500 companies, or the celebrity of performers or athletes. In these novels, characters show they value elements of both worlds, and they reject the binary, calling for a third option that allows them to navigate both terrains effectively, taking what they will as they blur the lines between the two. The straight/street life ambivalence, then, can talk back to the mythology of American as a meritocratic society, speaking directly to audiences who comprehend what is required to live with social, economic, and political inequalities. Because these pressures on the characters are so deeply entrenched in their everyday lives at interpersonal and societal levels, they must excel at navigating flawed and dangerous social and political strictures and structures.

Street fiction novels feature characters with a heightened awareness of what Loïc Wacquant would call “urban relegation.” The characters testify to the fact that “relegation is a collective activity, not an individual state; a relation (of economic, social and symbolic power) between collectives, not a gradational attribute of persons” (Wacquant, 2016, p. 1078). The ambivalence in the stories makes space for a variety of responses to the condition of urban relegation and all it entails, underscoring the fact that though the characters in the novels are connected, they are not the same. Regardless of their varied commitments to mimesis, the novels present people who face serious challenges but who are not deficient in resources or power. Though they may be objectified at times, the characters are more often portrayed as individual subjects who think and act according to their will. The stories become a space to imagine the myriad of lives constructed under the conditions of urban relegation and the dominant culture that perpetuates it. As Homi Bhaba suggests, “Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act

of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the ‘content’ of another culture, as a difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power—hierarchy, normalization, marginalization, and so forth” (Bhabha, 1985, p. 41-42). I understand this to mean that street fiction, with all of its tensions and contradictions in relationship to the dominant American culture, can still take up a “counter-canonical discourse” (Tiffin, 1987, p. 100). It need not (and does not) offer narratives in which characters only refute the dominant discourse. Characters here can be both attracted to and repelled by various aspects of any cultures they claim, and in fact, part of their appeal rests on their ability to do just that. It is this wrestling with contradictions that gives street fiction some of its most important dimensions of authenticity.

“Me Against the World”: The Self in Street Fiction

The ideology of the world of street fiction is largely mediated through the self as it is figured through the protagonists of the novels. Whether the author employs a first-person, dialogue-rich narration, or a third-person omniscient perspective, the novels usually position the reader in a sympathetic relationship with the main character, even if he or she has “done dirt.” The identities of the protagonists hinge both on a sense of the web of identities that form the self, the unique individual, and identity as a part of a community or more realistically, communities of the “street.” Authors like Sofia Quintero are keenly aware of the intersectionalities within characters’ identities. She remarks:

This is why in all my hip-hop novels you will see friendship and romance among Latinos, African Americans and Afro-Caribbean characters. In my first Black Artemis novel *Explicit Content*, the protagonist and a narrator is both African American and Trinidadian

and her best friend is Puerto Rican. In *Burn*, the key characters are Puerto Rican, Haitian and Dominican and even combinations of all those nationalities. Even in my “chica lit” novel *Divas Don’t Yield*, the lead among equals in an ensemble of four characters is an Afro-Latina hip hop feminist named Jackie Alvarado who leads with her Blackness. I was always a voracious reader but as a child I never saw self-identified Afro-Latin@s in anything I read so as a novelist I write my community into visibility. Writing is my primary ritual. (La Bianca, 2010)

Quintero’s comments here show elements of racial identity, gender, ethnicity, and various cultures help bring her characters to life authentically, thereby putting them in conversation with the community around her. I would be remiss if I implied that all street fiction authors shared Quintero’s sensitivities toward characters’ identities. Looking longitudinally across the genre, the novels do not always demonstrate a commitment to unbiased, nuanced representations of Black and brown urban characters. Even when authors express a desire to engage critically in issues of representation, they sometimes tacitly or overtly affirm stereotypes or directly recapitulate prejudicial perspectives of various groups of people.

Problematic representations of men and women along the lines of race, class, gender, ability and socioeconomic status occur frequently across the genre. Characters are frequently physically attractive, young, cisgender, heterosexual men and women. In *Dirty Red*, for instance, Red is described as having “toffee-colored skin,” “hazel eyes,” and thanks to “her mom’s Puerto-Rican genes [...] long, curly, red hair with just the right luster” (Stringer, 2006, p. 4). The main man in her life, Q, is “six feet” tall with “dark brown eyes and dark hair” in a “Caesar” cut with “Shemar Moore good looks” (Stringer, 2006, p. 2). As much as it is potentially powerful to center stories on Black and brown characters, novels like *Dirty Red* can simultaneously feed into damaging stereotypes of beauty and imply that one’s looks are a measure of one’s value (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, 2014).

In the case of representations of sexuality, a few street fiction texts represent LGBTQ

identities in nuanced ways (Morris, 2011). However, more often, transgender, bisexual, and homosexual relationships are aberrant; they arise from situations such as a lack of access to one's preferred partner (such as in prison) or from psychological damage (such as two women having a sexual relationship because they have been raped by men) (Stringer, 2006; Foye, 2012). These are many of the same troubled representations one sees in hip-hop or in Hollywood films, as others have observed (Rose 2008; Perry, 2004; Denzin, 2002). Still, the genre continues to evolve and branch out in new directions, and as the authors in this study show, the fictional space opened up by street fiction makes for a rich landscape to expand upon and explore a variety of "selves" connected to the "street."

As varied as representations of identity in street fiction may be, the main characters of the novels included in this study share a "me-against-the-world" (Tupac, 1995) individualism; a tradition fitting the larger narrative of the "rugged individual" of American folklore and the traditions of hip-hop and African-American literature. "Hip-hop music celebrates Me and We, as opposed to You...the Me is always at an advantage, either due to knowledge, ability or power. [...] The importance of the Self at once stands as the perfect expression of American politico-religious identification and individualism and yet also becomes translatable into a communitarian consciousness, locating hip hop voices as metonymic Black expression" (Perry, 2004, p. 89). Imani Perry's description of the nature and function of the self in hip-hop readily applies to street fiction. In this repository of stories, one finds narratives fueled by the ego of the protagonist. The protagonist is powerful, and even when his or her disadvantages are numerous, s/he will quickly work toward overcoming them or compensating for them. While the "me" factor sets the protagonist on a path toward achieving his/her goals in the face of adversity, the "we" factor in street fiction speaks to the collective sense of struggle in a world where survival is the priority.

Kenji Jasper's *Snow* provides an excellent example of this type of protagonist. Snow is motivated to deal drugs and steal in order to secure a financial future for his wife and daughter. Snow lives a divided life. He says: "Yeah, every day belonged to my two ladies. But the nights were still mine. Senses and strength heightened beneath the silver moon that gave light to the DC skies. And when it came to a job, I always did what I needed to come out on top. On this night in particular, I needed to *acquire* a truck filled with DVDs on their way to the mall in Greenbelt" (Jasper, 2007, p. 6). The nighttime world of Snow's criminal actions is *his world*; it is the "me" portion of his life. Snow knows he is perfectly suited for his "job" by virtue of the skills he has acquired on the street, but he also knows it is a matter of time before he is either killed or imprisoned, which would devastatingly impact the "we" portion of his life—his wife and daughter. Though Snow is a skilled murderer, thief and drug dealer, he does not relish the consequences he knows criminality may bring, especially since it could cause his two worlds to collide. As he pauses in front of a door (fittingly, on a threshold) before a theft he knows will require him to kill people, he narrates: "I wasn't preoccupied with inflicting pain. I didn't care about what the action would do for my reputation in the streets. It was just another job, just what I *had* to do in order to survive" (Jasper, 2007, p. 13). For Snow, survival means providing a comfortable life for his family using his criminal skills.

Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, or "systems of durable, transposable dispositions...which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (Bourdieu, 1990, p.53), is a particularly helpful concept in understanding how the world has shaped the characters in street fiction. In the "me-against-the-world" (Tupac, 1995) construct so often observed in street fiction novels, the

characters often maneuver through difficult situations, using their street sense to carve out a new kind of space for themselves. This ability to maneuver, to sense, to anticipate and react appropriately represent a kind of cultural and/or social capital (Bourdieu, 1986: cited in Navarro, 2006; p. 16). The “hustle” is the artful dodge, the ingenuity, the uniqueness of the individual coming through in a passionate assertion of the self, and it is highly valued in many street fiction texts. Bold acts, courage, creativity, scheming, perseverance, resourcefulness, resilience in the face of extreme situations are celebrated in the plots of these stories. In Bourdieu’s terms the street is a unique “field” (Gaventa, 2003, p. 6) or context with its own set of rules, which means to act powerfully in this context requires knowledge and actions that might be considered immoral or illegal in other arenas.

The “hustle” in street fiction narratives is not always portrayed positively. Even if a protagonist is an active subject making his or her own way through an imperfect world, many of the characters are caught up in the pursuit of one (if not all) hip-hop’s sacred triumvirate of money, power, and respect (Perry, 2004), and there is often a psychological toll to pay, if not a physical one. In the case of *Snow*, the title character finds himself unable to heal completely from a gunshot wound to the shoulder. Pain returns to the wound even after his body has healed:

The pain came when it wanted to. But the doctors couldn’t tell me why. I knew the original cause had been that slug that pierced my shoulder months earlier. But I’d been shot before. And from what I knew, the wounds weren’t supposed to ache months after.

Adele made me go to the doctor. Then he made me go to two different specialists. But all of their tests came back negative, the X-rays as normal as *Monday Night Football*. But one of those quacks, the only Black one, said that my problem could be *psychosomatic*, that the pain was all in my head.

I looked “psychosomatic” up in a medical book on one of my Thursday trips to the library. I suppose the doc could have been right. It could have just been in my mind. But I knew that wasn’t the case. Shit, I wasn’t crazy. I’d hurt enough in my life. The last thing I wanted was to imagine being hurt some more. (Jasper, 2007; p. 83)

The pain in Snow's shoulder is a physical reminder of the unrest and anxiety he feels about his profession and the danger that places the security of his family in harm's way. His inability to resolve the tensions between his street life and his home life create an existential crisis that manifests in phantom pain, reminding him that he has to decide whether he will choose to continue to work in the street or whether he will find a safer, yet less lucrative, profession. He is haunted by his decisions, and he endures a physical reminder of the dire consequences his choices may bring.

Any morality or philosophy present in the books must account for the characters' worlds, their personal histories, and the oppression or discrimination they may face. After faking his own death, Animal, the main character in K'wan Foye's novel, returns to Harlem to kill Shai and his cronies because they put his soulmate, Gucci, in a coma by wounding her during a shootout. Though he is a brutal assassin, Animal is also someone the hood "loves" because "he would live and die by what he believes in" (Foye, 2012, p. 404). He is repeatedly described as both a man and a monster, and as skillful a killer as he is, he is haunted by the murders he has committed:

First blood had been on them, and the last would be his to draw. Shrugging off the ghosts that were trying to ride him into insanity, Animal got out of bed and prepared for the night's work. He took a weed clip from the ashtray and lit it on his way to the kitchen, where he began rummaging through the cabinets until he found what he was looking for: a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels. [...] Animal put his fist through the bathroom mirror in an attempt to destroy the monster staring back at him, but the monster simply multiplied in the broken shards of glass. In each split image he saw the faces of his victims laughing at him mockingly. (Foye, 2012; p. 146-148)

Aspects of the stories like this complicate portrayals of heartless, ruthless "gangstas" that seem to flood popular culture. The desire to expose the vulnerability of characters or the mistakes they make connects to authors' repeated framing of their stories as "cautionary tales" which include pedagogical elements for readers. For instance, when asked about her purpose for writing street

fiction, Vickie Stringer said: “You know, I really wasn't paying attention to the market. It was more from the personal experience that motivated me to want to share my urban experiences, my experiences in the street game; you know, the dope game, those sorts of things. And I want to inspire other young women [...] so that my mistakes wouldn't have to be theirs” (Corley, 2006).

K'wan Foye takes a similar stance in this 2010 interview:

My books are different in a way to where I may show you a blueprint to how this kid went from ashy to classy, but also on the flipside, before it's all said and done, something bad is going to happen. I create these casualties for these ghetto superheroes; these ghetto Robin Hoods, and then I think of the most violent way possible to murder them at the end of the book. It really kind of hits home because the reader is going, “Damn, well what the hell. He had it all.” But you have to remember that he also had the karma on his back from what he had to do to get it all. The morality of my stories is what makes them different. When some of these people are reading these books you have to remember that they're looking for something in your work. They just spent \$15 on your book and might have only had \$20 on them. So you want them to say, “What can I take from this book so that I know this was money well spent, and I can recommend it to somebody else?” I try to leave readers with some kind of moral content, or something that will leave a lasting imprint on your soul. That's what makes me different than someone who says, “I got an ill story about a nigga who robs banks and him in his crew roll around drinking champagne in Harlem like Jim Jones and them.” At the end of the day for me, it's not only about that. It's cool to entertain people and have that kind of stuff in your books, because I got plenty of bottle popping in my books, but at the same time there has to be some kind of substance to what you're putting out. If it's just words on paper it doesn't count for anything. (Lewis, 2010).

I take Foye's comments to suggest that his readers expect him to include “something” that requires them to engage with the struggle to reconcile opposing forces that shape the lives of real people who live in low socioeconomic urban neighborhoods. For him, fictional portrayals of this world that solely glamorize the landscape without acknowledging these tensions lack purpose, and from a commercial standpoint, they are unlikely to succeed. There are many street fiction novels that have been written solely for their commercial appeal, however, this fact should not negate the possibility for some novels in the genre to work toward deeper understandings and

more nuanced representations of the worlds the stories depict.

Street fiction has the potential to further complicate stock images of the street by calling on readers to reconsider the “thug,” the “gangsta,” or the “hood rat.” Though many street fiction texts feature flat, stereotypical characters, the novels in this study show that the genre has more depth to offer. Rather than serving as an endpoint to character development, “stock” characters become a point of departure for authors; a fictive space where they can reflect on the stereotype itself. Before I discuss an example, it is worth considering the purpose of stereotypes. Dyer (1984) writes that stereotypes are a strategy ruling groups use to establish the parameters of “normalcy.” Encoded within this highly political framing of normalcy is the “world-view, value system, sensibility, and ideology” of the dominant group (Dyer, 1984, p. 356). Yet the maintenance of this normalcy is an ongoing process which “must be ceaselessly built and rebuilt in the face of both implicit challenges to it” from subcultures who might challenge the dominant ideology or sense of normalcy, thereby shifting “who shall have the power to fashion the world” (Ibid.). Street fiction novelists are capable of changing who has control of the depiction of normalcy when it comes to the “thug,” the “gangsta,” or the “hood rat” because their characters bring more dimension to these terms. Consider Kenji Jasper’s commentary on creating the character Thai Williams for his 2001 novel, *Dark* (a precursor to *Snow*).

I was definitely a child of the late 80s and early 90s in D.C. when the crack epidemic and the war on drugs, the height of D.C. as the murder capital of the world was going on...I watched a lot of guys that I came up with end up in prison...murdered...dealing drugs or being fathers in their early days. I was fortunate and blessed to have parents that were very involved and that were very strict about what I was allowed to do and where I was allowed to be. It really kept me out of the fray in certain points of time. But, you know, I had gone through high school and through college, and I was always thinking about the smart, ambitious young Black men who didn’t have the chance to go to college and who never left their neighborhoods, who were slaving away either in their jobs or out on the streets without college degrees, and Thai Williams who is the protagonist of *Dark* is

really an amalgamation of that kind of guy. [...] I wanted the idea of a guy who never left his neighborhood, who loved his neighborhood, being forced to leave because of a criminal act. As a result of this bad thing, he kind of had his eyes opened to what the world is out there and beyond. (Turpin, 2013)

Jasper supplants the dominant narrative in (White) American culture about economic and socially marginalized young Black men as “thugs.” He sees clearly how their struggles could easily have been his own, and he is aware of the privileges and circumstances that set his life on an alternate trajectory. By pointing out the tension of being “smart” and “ambitious” with no outlet and no broader perspective of the world to serve as a compass for one’s actions, Jasper counters the “normal” definition of the “thug.” One sees this reflected in Jasper’s treatment of Snow, as well. After Snow and his friends are arrested for dealing drugs, he meets a police officer who used to live in his neighborhood and who remembers him as being a “good kid.”

“So why you remember me?” I asked, trying to seem like I didn’t want him to keep talking, as if he wasn’t helping me to avoid the pain and uncertainty that were already coursing through me.

“How could I *not*?” He grinned as he took a seat on the bench next to me. “Hoped I wouldn’t see you here, though.”

“Hey,” I said, shrugging my shoulders, trying to be arrogant. “It is what it is.”

“You ain’t so far in that you can’t turn around,” he reminded me. “I used to see you, even if you didn’t see me. Everybody used to say how smart you were, that you were a good kid.”

He stopped for a moment to search my eyes for something that wasn’t there. Then he spoke again.

“Look, we got who we want downstairs. They got records, they don’t give a fuck about the future. You ain’t like them, and don’t let them tell you that you are. All I want from you is to not see you in here again.” (Jasper, 2007; 63-64)

Exchanges like the one here between Snow and the police officer open up a fictional space where this “thug” is humanized. He was someone before he was labeled a criminal, and he has the chance to be someone else afterwards. Even through Snow’s uncaring, hardened facade, the police officer “sees” Snow the same way Jasper saw the young men growing up on the streets of D.C., affording the reader the same window onto the human condition of both the character and

the real people he represents.

Aside from attention to their psychological dimensions, another important consideration for street fiction characters is the representation of their bodies. Particularly in narratives with female protagonists, street fiction novels often feature long descriptions of the character's physique, and in doing so, they tie his or her body and personality together. As an example, I juxtapose the following two passages; the first is a description of the protagonist, Red, which occurs at the beginning of *Dirty Red*, (Stringer, 2006), and the second is a portrayal of Esperanza drawn from a scene near the end of the novel *Picture Me Rollin'* (Artemis, 2005).

Red wasn't your average bitch, though. Don't get it fucked up; she was a cold showstopper and she knew it. She had an average build; nothing was too big or too small. Her complexion was her star attraction. It was toffee-colored with a reddish hue, flawless, not a pimple in sight. Her mom's Puerto Rican genes gave her long, curly red hair with just the right luster. Her hazel eyes were courtesy of her father.

She could put halt to rush-hour traffic with her Puerto Rican beauty complemented by African-American features. Her angelic smile and heavenly white teeth were the perfect cover for being as foul as she wanted to be. Always rockin' her game face, she knew how to bat her Cover Girl lashes and mesmerize even the hardest nigga into being an unwitting victim.

Oddly, Red had a rough edge about her that she combined with a powerful sex appeal. Her malicious ways were masked by her million-dollar smile. Always dressed to perfection, Red expressed her femininity by the length of her heels, whether they were sandals, boots, or slides. This automatically gave her five feet, five inches of height the presence of a giant and she carried herself as such.

Red was definitely a dime, no doubt, but her ways made her ugly. Nobody and nothing could keep her from doing her dirt. Not only was Red a vindictive person, she also was a master dissembler. Living life in a New York state of mind, her goal was to get rich at all costs, regardless of who was hurt in the process. Red believed that there was no Lady Luck. Every opportunity meant preparation. She was convinced that success was not all that mysterious, and life was a game that needed to be played. And when it came to her, there were no rules—and it was always her turn (Stringer, 2006; 4-5).

The cadence of Red's description is punchy and bold, like the character herself. Red's description is idealized—she has “good” hair (long, curly and red), good skin (light and blemish-free)—all the physical and material features that adorn traditionally beautiful women, including

elegant clothing and high heels. Her physical assets are itemized like commodities, and her “Cover Girl lashes” and “million-dollar smile” show that her self-perception is heavily invested in a display of capitalistic wealth. Her body, her image and her style are tools she uses against men who are “unwitting victims” to reach her goal of getting “rich at all costs,” and she must keep her look on point at all times because it is a significant source of her power—it is her vehicle to money and “success.” Red is aware of the male gaze; she knows how to use it to her advantage. Her body is a pawn in the “game,” and it gives her an upper hand over anyone who admires it.

After she showered she went into the bedroom to dress. Esperanza scoured her drawers until she found a catsuit she had not worn in years. As she expected, it fit tighter than ever, thanks to both Bedford Hills and Mickey D’s. Still, Esperanza decided that if she could get into it she should wear it. Nothing else she owned seemed right for the task at hand. She completed the outfit with a pair of stiletto boots.

Then Esperanza applied a full face of makeup. Concealer under the eyes, more than she usually needed. Foundation and then powder. Then she gave her eyes the works—eyeliner and mascara and even false lashes and eye shadow, which Esperanza ordinarily saved for special nights on the town. She outlined her lips with pencil and then filled them in with a shiny reddish gloss. Esperanza streaked blush across her cheeks, then turned to her hair.

Although she had not adopted Dulce’s [her sister] wash-and-go-look, Esperanza had bothered little with her hair lately. After showering she would at least pull it into a ponytail or braid so as to flatten her natural curl into sedate waves. Now she dug up her flatiron and slid it through sections of her hair to complete the look.

As Esperanza stiffened her hair with a pungent spray, she studied her face in the mirror. Not so long ago she had enjoyed the time it took to look this way. She thought of it as pampering herself. Without conducting this ritual each and every day, Esperanza could not feel beautiful. Now she looked at herself and felt like a clown. This mask made her ugly, hiding who she really was beneath inches of drugstore cosmetics. This concocted face, repressed hair, and desperate outfit all belonged to the girl she used to be, not the woman that Maite and Isoke and her own sister believed she could be, and whom Esperanza herself wanted to be even when she doubted she could ever exist. But this was who Jesus wanted and who she had to let him believe she still was. If he could love anyone, this was she. (Artemis, 2005, p. 279-280).

Though both women are aware that their bodies are sites of the performances of their identities, Esperanza, unlike Red, does not delight in her adornment. Esperanza is a different

person than she was before she went to prison, so now when she puts on a catsuit and stilettos, she feels false. As she puts on makeup and straightens her hair, she is aware of the artifice of her image, and the fact that she is creating this version of herself only to satisfy Jesus, her domineering, manipulative love interest who allowed her to go to jail for a crime he and his friends committed. Esperanza has been like Red in the past, reveling in the power she feels from beautifying herself in accordance with street aesthetics, but she has come through that place and her relationship to the process of adorning her body and packaging herself as she *was* is part of what is preventing her from *becoming who she wants to be*. The act of concocting herself, of literally “making herself up,” is a source of oppression, and she does it joylessly.

There is a rich dialogue about the self, feminism, power, race agency and representation present in these two images when one sees them side-by-side. In her work on the visual elements of the cinema, Laura Mulvey suggests that the image of the body is a source of selfhood, stating that it “constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition /misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the ‘I’ of subjectivity” (1992, p. 345). While readers might be able to debate which of the two women is more empowered or the more fully actualized “self” in these two excerpts, the interplay between them demonstrates that identities are always works in progress, and that “identity formation—even body-coded ethnic and gender identity—is a chaotic process that can have no end” (Gilroy, 1996, p. 394). Street fiction novels have the power to reaffirm identity formation as a process, which can be particularly powerful for young people who long to see someone who looks like them in the fiction they read.

While Red and Esperanza’s bodies are both sites of identity performance (along the lines of race, class, gender, and ethnicity), they tell very different stories about their subjectivities. In

the first example, the reader is placed in a position that mimics the male gaze, seeing Red as nothing more the sum of her physical attributes. While she does have the power to manipulate and control, it is only through her body that this seems possible, since her good looks are her most important feature. In a subtle but significant shift, Sofia Quintero puts the reader in a position of looking at Esperanza as she looks at herself in the mirror, taking the act of looking away from the reader and placing it with Esperanza. It is Esperanza who is in a position to judge herself, and though she does not like what she sees, her distaste for her own image is a marker of the changes in her life. Esperanza recognizes herself in the mirror, and in doing so, she misrecognizes her old life, disavowing it from her identity. In doing so, she shows she is a more fully actualized subject than Red, though Red's description may sound more celebratory at first.

The “Other” in Street Fiction

As I have previously mentioned, the protagonists in street fiction are people who are systematically marginalized or “othered” by American culture, which favors and normalizes White, middle or upper-class, heterosexual males. Of the many facets of identity that run contrary to this dominant narrative, race, class, and gender are most emphasized in the texts. Evidence of the United States' lengthy history of devaluing and suppressing Black and brown people politically, economically, socially, and culturally are everywhere in these stories, but representations of White middle- or upper-class characters themselves are scarce. The absence of these characters subverts the overrepresentation of White middle- or upper-class characters in American literature, making an important space on the page for characters who might not often be rendered in novels. However, quantity does not always correlate to quality or reality when it comes to representation.

In street fiction, the world of the street is associated with Black and brown racial identities, which is cast adversarially to the “white” world. The fact that these two worlds are locked into such a relationship is a constant that can be traced back to the genesis of the genre and frames many narratives I have encountered during this research. For instance, as far back as Iceberg Slim’s 1969 novel *Pimp*, one finds the following passages describing the relationship between “White” and “Black” worlds, and the movement of the individual through these spaces:

It was 10:30. The sky was a fresh, bright bitch. This first April night had gone sucker and gifted her with a shimmering bracelet of diamond stars. The fat moon lurked like an evil yellow eye staring down at the pimps, hustlers, and whores hawk-eyeing for a mark, a cop.

I felt the raw tenderness of first April winds lashing at the hem of my white alligator. I felt the birth stirrings of that poisonous pimp’s rapture. I felt powerful and beautiful.

I thought, “I was still Black in the White man’s world. My hope to be important and admired could be realized even behind this black stockade. It was simple, just pimp my ass off and get a ton of scratch. Everybody in both worlds kissed your ass black and blue if you had flash and front.” (p. 99) [...]

I thought, “What if my Black face like magic turned white. Shit, I could go out that hotel front door and sneak through the barbed wire stockade. I’d be like a wolf turned loose on a flock of sheep. That White world wouldn’t tumble that I’m a Nigger. I could pay ’em all back in spades, the Dummy, the White Bull, that bastard judge that crucified me on my first rap. Once I escape this black hell I’ll find a way all right. Well Nigger, you’re pretty, but a bleach cream will never be invented that will make you White. So, pimp your ass off and be somebody with what you got. It could be worse, you could be an ugly Nigger.” (p. 123) [...]

Maybe some morning about dawn all the Black folks will sing Hallelujah! God’s White board of directors will untie the red tape. God will roll up his sleeves. He’ll smash down the invisible stockades. He’ll kill all the rats in the Black ghettos. Fill all the Black bellies and con all the White folks that Niggers are his children, too. [...]

“Lord, I’m not asking you to bless my pimping. I ain’t that stupid. Lord, I know you ain’t Black. Surely you know, if you’re up there, what it’s like to be Black down here. These White folks are doing all the fine living and sucking up all the gravy. I gotta have some of that living and some of that gravy. [...]

Please don’t let me croak before I live some and get to be somebody down here in the White man’s world.” (p. 146)

Slim repeatedly refers to the ghetto as a “black stockade,” and though the boundaries

between his world and the White world are not tangible, they are terribly real. He fantasizes about being able to cross the line between the two worlds by making a lot of money, but he knows that the money only goes so far since there is nothing powerful enough to “make you White”. He dreams of one day waking up White so he could surreptitiously take revenge on the White men who have unfairly used their power against him. Slim conceptualizes God as a White, male, capitalist powerbroker (with a “board of directors”), and while he can never be White like God, Slim aspires to obtain some of the strength that comes through money he earns from pimping. He knows it would take divine intervention to subvert the deeply entrenched relationship between these two worlds, yet Slim longs to have enough privilege from money to enjoy some of “that living and some of that gravy” that seems automatically accessible to his White counterparts. For him, pimping is a source of power, and it is a way he can take hold of the selfhood that is stripped of him by virtue of his race and his socioeconomic status. All of Slim’s remarks speak to the volatile interplay between the two worlds in which he attempts to maintain selfhood.

These passages from *Pimp* remind me of Franz Fanon’s eloquent remarks on the creation of a national literature in the face of colonialism. He writes:

While at the beginning the native intellectual used to produce his work to be read exclusively by the oppressor, whether with the intention of charming him or of denouncing him through ethnic or subjectivist means, now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people.

It is only from that moment that we can speak of a national literature. Here there is, at the level of literary creation, the taking up and clarification of themes which are typically nationalist. This may be properly called a *literature of combat*, [emphasis mine] in the sense that it calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation. It is a literature of combat because it moulds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is a literature of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space. (Fanon, 1968, p. 120)

Iceberg Slim fulfills Fanon's vision of the "native intellectual" creating a "literature of combat" in his writing. Slim is clearly the subject of his own work; not only is the book title his name (or at least his pseudonym), but he is the protagonist through which all aspects of the narrative are filtered. Though Slim provides grim details of oppressive moments in his life throughout the novel, he refuses to be objectified. Slim speaks to "his own people" in the sense that his target audience is comprised of people who understand or share his worldview. Just as not everyone who watches and enjoys the *Godfather* needs to be a member of the Italian mafia, not all of Slim's readers need to be pimps. However, they must strive to comprehend the forces that act on Slim's life and the pitfalls he must navigate. Primarily, he writes to people of color living in urban areas who have not seen their stories reflected back in popular media often enough (his audience is not the "oppressor"), but this does not mean that others cannot read his story and gain something from his insights. He is unapologetic in his choice of profession and in his actions, and he links his choices to an unyielding desire for freedom which America's capitalist society has taught him can only be had through money and the power that comes with it.

Many other street fiction novels affirm that the writing that takes place in this genre speaks against racialized experiences that favor White people in America. In an especially metacognitive moment, the character Tionna in K'wan Foye's novel *Animal* (2012) addresses the problematic assertion that reading and the world of books belong to White people. In this scene, a young Black killer-for-hire named Ashanti visits his friend Gucci who is in a coma at the hospital. Gucci's friend Tionna is in the room with her when he arrives, and Ashanti notices she is reading a book to pass the time.

“...What are you reading anyhow?” He picked the book up and looked at the cover and the title. “*The Last Outlaw*? What is this? Some kind of western or something?”

“No, it’s not a western.” She snatched the book from him. ‘It’s an urban fiction novel.’

Ashanti frowned. “I’ve hear of fiction and nonfiction. What the fuck is urban fiction supposed to be?”

“It’s like rap music, but on paper instead of CDs,” she explained. “You should try checking some of these out. I know you’d like them.”

“I’m cool on that reading shit. *Don’t none of them books talk about where I’m from so I ain’t got time to be reading no white man’s fantasy*,” Ashanti said in a disinterested tone. [My emphasis.]

“For your information, most of these books are written by Blacks and Latinos who come from the same thing we come from, and a lot of the stories are very good. Stop being so closed minded about everything.” (Foye, 2012, p. 137)

Ashanti is suspicious of the world of books because he has learned there is no mirror for him on their pages; the books are written for an audience that does not include him, and they describe a world that does not resonate with him. Tionna uses rap as a way of making inroads through Ashanti’s prejudgments about her book to show him that his racial identity need not exclude him from reading; literacy need not only belong to the “other.” By exposing the ideological and creative link between street fiction and hip-hop and challenging the concept that reading novels is associated with Whiteness, wealth, and privilege, the genre may garner interest from people like Ashanti. Many youth share Ashanti’s attitude toward reading novels, even though they possess a wide range of literacies (Tatum & Gholnecsar, 2012), and educators must look critically at how school-based literacy practices curtail the desire to read, even in African-American communities with longstanding traditions of reading (McHenry, 2002). Contemporary stories featuring Black and brown characters like Ashanti are not just worth telling; they may redefine what it means to read for people who have been made to feel a sense of exclusion from the world of books.

Rather than being focal points in the narrative, when White middle or upper class

characters do appear in street fiction, they are frequently “othered” in relationship to the protagonist. Some White characters are warped by the poisonous fallacy of their supremacy, which is precisely the situation with Corrections Officer (CO) Lynch in the following scene from *Picture Me Rollin’*. Here Esperanza recalls a time during her prison sentence when she refuses to say the pledge of allegiance on the Fourth of July at the behest of Patsy, a White inmate.

So when Pasty—an older white woman doing seven for embezzlement—suggested they pledge allegiance to the flag before the staff-inmate touch football game, Esperanza remained seated on the bench.

“C’mon, Esperanza, you have to stand.”

Esperanza felt a fleeting pang of guilt, because she actually liked Pasty and hoped that she would not take her refusal personally. “No.” Once she said it, it no longer seemed so difficult, and Pasty’s feelings carried less importance. “No.” [...] “Fuck no. I’m not saying the Pledge of Allegiance.”

CO Lynch overheard her, and it was on. She kept her cool through most of his patriotic tirade, then pulled an Isoke herself when she calmly stated that she had a right to *not* say the pledge as much as he had the right to recite it. At one point Lynch changed his tone and politely asked, “Will you at least tell me why you don’t want to say it, Cepeda?” [...] So just as kindly as Lynch asked her, Esperanza pleaded the Fifth, even though she didn’t believe anything she did would actually incriminate herself. (Artemis, 2005, p. 157)

Though they occupy the same space, Patsy’s prison experience is a world away from Esperanza’s; the two women are separated by the ways in which race and class have shaped their lives. Patsy is serving a short sentence for white-collar crime. She has no problem aligning herself with a nationalist gesture to the American flag because she maintains most of her racial privilege, even as a convict. For Patsy, the flag is a symbol of pride and power, and her privilege blinds her to the fact that it signifies oppression to Esperanza. Though Esperanza politely refuses to discuss her choice, her resistance to making a hypocritical gesture lands her in solitary confinement. CO Lynch wields multivalent authority over Esperanza in this scene by virtue of his sex, race, and position. His abuse of Esperanza by punishing her for not saluting the flag is a thinly veiled effort to conceal the fact that his power over her is illusory and unfounded. The

scene is a reminder that even now, Black and brown people are blocked from critiquing injustice if the critique challenges America's "greatness" narrative. CO Lynch, in attempting to preserve his authority, undermines his power by showing just how fragile American nationalism must be if one Latina remaining silent during the pledge of allegiance is so dangerous.

Dirty Red (Stringer, 2006) features a scene in which the "other," a White woman named Gloria Schottenstein, serves as a mirror for Red. To prepare for a "legitimate" livelihood when she leaves Detroit, Red tricks Gloria into helping her obtain her real estate license. The following passage is from their first meeting:

[...] Red quickly went from nervousness to admiration. Gloria's office held trophies from years past, when she was at the height of her game. She had soft leather furniture, exquisite artwork hanging on the walls and a nicely framed picture of her and her husband that sat on the corner of her desk. "I'm sorry, dear. Did I forget an appointment with you?"

"No, I wanted to come by and apply for a position with you. I lied about having an appointment. I just said that to get in to see you."

Gloria smiled. "Nice approach." She walked over to the fridge and removed two bottles of Evian water. She extended one to Red who graciously accepted.

"Thank you." Red handed her the resumé.

Gloria looked it over. When she was done, she simply said, "So you want to become a Realtor?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Don't 'yes, ma'am' me. You make me feel old, sweetie. Call me Gloria."

"Gloria, I want to be a Realtor."

"Why?"

The real answer was so she could make a lot of money but Red knew that Gloria didn't want to hear this.

"I enjoy working with people and helping them make their dreams come true by finding the perfect home." Red wasn't surprised when Gloria smiled at this response. She knew it was what Gloria wanted to hear.

"This is very hard work and the hours are extremely long. I built my company with one client. That client later referred me to another client, and then another."

Red absorbed every word that she was saying. This was the flipside of the illegal game. She was learning a legal hustle and getting game from the a master of real estate.[...]

Though they were years apart and from different worlds, Gloria and Red were essentially the same. They possessed a similar quality—a quality of confidence, a commanding inner power and a drive to prosper at all costs that eluded most other

women, including Red's mother.

Red and Gloria bonded instantly. (p. 63)

In Gloria, Red sees both an opportunity to advance her plan to leave Detroit with enough assets to begin a new life for herself away from the street. Red is figured as Gloria's equal or perhaps her better, given the way she is able to manipulate the conversation to gain access to the real estate opportunity she wants by performing respectability, a protestant work ethic, and a selfless desire to help others "make their dreams come true". Red's keen ability to tell Gloria what she wants to hear in a professional, Standard American English dialect signals her astute reading of the power dynamics at play in this situation. Here, Red's vocabulary and syntax is markedly different than the urban Black vernacular English she uses with her friends. Recalling Samy Alim's work on critical linguistic awareness and John Baugh's work on linguistic profiling (2003), the penalties for using language that signals subordination can be drastic, and Red knows it. She uses her speech to mark herself as member of Gloria's discourse community (Alim, 2012) in a maneuver that supports her movement toward her goals. In the comfortable bourgeois trappings of Gloria's office, Red envisions her future life, and Gloria's wealth and status provide a means of access. Though Red has an affinity for Gloria, she does not allow her feelings to divert her from her goals, and later in the novel, Red betrays Gloria's trust, leaving Gloria to face the fallout from a sham real estate deal while she sneaks away with the money. In writing that Red and Gloria are "years apart but from different worlds," and in showing that Red can use the language of power at will, the author places Red on equal footing with a successful upper-class White woman, tipping the scales of power that would often give Gloria the upper hand over Red. To take it one step further, in a society where it might usually be more likely for Gloria to exploit someone like Red, Red turns the tables and does just that to Gloria.

By contrast, consider the following passage in *Picture Me Rollin'*. Here, Esperanza is waiting to talk to her professor, Maite Rodriguez, about working as her teaching assistant at class at Barnard College. One of Maite's students at Barnard is walking with her to her office after class, and Esperanza overhears them talking about a disagreement between that just took place:

"I don't know, Professor Rodriguez. I'm not the enemy just because I'm white," said Allison. "And I feel the harder I try to prove it, the more suspicious people of color become." Her eyes watered, and Esperanza began to feel sorry for her, even though she suspected that if she heard this Rodney's take on the matter, she'd probably side with him.

Maite placed a hand on Allison's shoulder and said, "You're not the enemy, Allison; racism is. The problem is that because you're white, you may benefit from racism whether or not you intend to, and whether you're aware of it or not. So like I said, the one thing you can do is listen to those who suffer. And it's also important that you not only try to have conversations about race with people of color, but also with other white people like yourself who genuinely want to fight racism." Allison clung to Maite's words like a devoted parishioner. "The way you feel right now is something to share with other white people who have been in the same situation. Maybe collectively you can get to the root of why you feel that way and what you can do about it. Believe it or not, part of what it means to be an ally is to be honest about your own self-interest. If racism were to disappear, what's in it for you? Before you can make someone like Rodney understand and have faith that there is something in it for you, you yourself have to gain clarity about what that something is." Maite inserted the key into the office door, then pushed it open. "I want you to go ahead in the assigned reading. Read the material scheduled for discussion the second week of August. Especially the Tim Wise and Peggy McIntosh articles." (Artemis, 2005, p. 183)

Though this scene features a seemingly sympathetic portrayal of Allison and her White liberal guilt over offending Rodney, her Black classmate, reveals her selfishness. Allison looks for solace and approval from Maite to escape the discomfort of encountering her own racism. By describing Allison as Maite's "devout parishioner," Black Artemis expresses Allison's desire for absolution from a person of color as a way of excusing her from the difficult work of dismantling White supremacy at the level of the self. Maite redirects Allison away from Rodney, challenging her to become an ally by working against racism through focusing on her own Whiteness. "Locating Whiteness, rather than racism, at the centre of anti-racism focuses

attention on how White people's identities are shaped by a broader racist culture, and brings to the fore the responsibilities that White people have for addressing racism" (Greene et al., 2007, p. 390). Allison acknowledges racism exists, but she cannot reconcile the dissonance between her desire to end it and its pervasiveness (Andrews, 2016). Erroneously (and in spite of what may be her best intentions), she looks to Rodney and Maite to correct the problem, further contributing to the burden of racism born by people of color in American society. One sees here a counternarrative to most of American literature where the injustice of White supremacy is infrequently an overt subject, and where Black and brown lives are often objectified in the name of American capitalism and democracy (Morrison, 1993). In mentioning Tim Wise and Peggy McIntosh's seminal writings on race, the author provides a pedagogical element to the scene for readers who might like to explore the subject of Whiteness and privilege. What is more, there is a respect for though other ways of knowing implied in this scene. Esperanza is an ex-convict with far less formal education than Allison, she has a much better grasp of the problem of White supremacy because of the firsthand experiences that guide her understanding. I do not wish to suggest that the oppressions Esperanza has endured are at all positive. However, epistemologically, the value of knowledge Esperanza has gained from lived experience is greater than the "book learning" that Allison possesses when it comes to the subject of race. By writing these insights through Esperanza's eyes, the reader becomes aware that though Esperanza may lack the economic privileges necessary to be a student in Maite's class, she possesses wisdom that is both relevant and worthy.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon wrote: "Since the Other was reluctant to recognize me, there was only one answer: to make myself known" (Fanon, 1970, loc. 984). Part of the power of White supremacy is its invisibility (Maxey, 2006), and given that racial identity

makes up part of the identity matrix that locates the characters of street fiction, it stands to reason that this body of writing would allocate some space to treating the subject. The aforementioned scenes make Whiteness visible, and put it in conversation with the Black and brown identities of the protagonists. However, the scenes from the two novels offer different messages about Whiteness. While Red demonstrates a keen awareness of the communication skills associated with privilege, she does not challenge the hierarchy that places Gloria Schottstein in a superior position. She takes it for granted, and uses the tools available to her to navigate “the system.” One may admire Red for her skills, but she does not critically call racial hierarchies or oppression into question. Red’s goal seems to invert the power structures rather than dismantle them.

In *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Morrison describes how Blackness in American literature was constructed through the gaze of White characters. In the scenes in *Picture Me Rollin’*, one sees a shift of the gaze where Black and brown characters observe White characters struggling with dimensions of race and privilege. Through Esperanza’s eyes this altered gaze gives a critical yet sympathetic look at Allison’s guilt and good intentions, and it clocks Patsy’s well-meaning but problematic urgings to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, not to mention CO Lynch’s perverse and pathetic misuse of authority. This criticality, which is all but missing from Red’s admiration for and emulation of Gloria Schottstein, reorients the conversation on race. Esperanza moves to transcend the hegemony of Whiteness through her consciousness of it (Cesaire, 1972; Bell, 1992), modeling a humanized approach to the “other.” Thus, *Picture Me Rollin’* better engages a multi-dimensional racial awareness, demonstrating the need for people of all races to share in the critical work of dismantling White supremacy, or to borrow from Fanon once more: “Both have to move away from the inhuman voices of their respective

ancestors so that a genuine communication can be born. Before embarking on a positive voice, freedom needs to make an effort at disalienation. At the start of his life, a man is always congested, drowned in contingency. It is through self-consciousness and renunciation, through a permanent tension of his freedom, that man can create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world” (Fanon, 1970, loc. 1994).

Like most popular culture, street fiction texts are not immune to problematic representations of race, class, gender, or ability. There are plenty of instances of colorism and misogyny in street fiction to counteract critical moments like the examples I have shown from *Picture Me Rollin'*, since these authors, like those of every other genre, are susceptible to prejudice. However, if they are approached with a critical eye, even the problematic representations offer food for thought. What circumstances or beliefs make Red idolize then manipulate and dehumanize Gloria Schottstein? Why does Red say she feels sorry for Allison, but then acknowledges that she would likely side with Rodney? Which of the two novels better achieves the *disalienation* Fanon describes when it comes to race? Questions like these are rich, and they call for knowledge from the street fiction texts, American history and society, and perhaps even philosophy or psychology for answers. While it's certainly possible for readers to gloss over these issues if they are only interested in reading for pleasure, the ideas are present in the text and therefore, the texts could stimulate deep discussions of power, privilege, identity, class, race, and gender, as many critical educators have shown with their use of popular culture in pedagogical settings (Dyson, 2003; Emdin, 2010; Morrell, 2008; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Hill, 2009a; Mahiri, 2004; Marshall & Gibson, 2009).

A City of Broken Dreams? Sociological Realism and Flights of Fantasy in Street Fiction

One of the tensions that sits at the heart of street fiction is the relationship between the real and the fantastic. On one hand, street fiction is steeped in intense social issues such as poverty, child abuse, mass incarceration, gentrification, violent crimes and the drug trade. On the other hand, street fiction features unreal sexual encounters, wild revenge fantasies, and extravagant descriptions of consumer excess. The two poles I describe might seem at odds with one another, but they hinge on the same premise of finding a way to grapple with the contradictions and tensions inherent in living in zones of urban relegation. When it comes to the purpose and structure of its narratives, street fiction draws upon African-American literary tradition in two ways. One, the tradition of testifying to selfhood, humanity and reality that can be traced back to slave narratives (Gates, 1988) echoes through street fiction. Two, as in hip-hop, the fantastic spinning of yarns or the telling of tall tales is a separate but equally important part of the genre, which is a tradition stemming back to African folktales (Perry, 2004, p. 76). With the simultaneous presence of the realistic and the fantastic, the hyperbolic and the mimetic, the genre demands a high level of acumen to navigate its complex textual terrain.

The following excerpts from *Animal* (Foye, 2012) show the interplay between the real and the imagined in this novel. After faking his death, Animal returns from Puerto Rico to seek revenge against Shai, the head of the Clark family's organized crime empire. As he walks through his neighborhood, he notices the effects of gentrification and development on Harlem: "Much had changed since the last time he strolled the streets of Harlem. Where tenements and bodegas had once stood there were now high-rise buildings and fancy cafes. The changes to Harlem weren't limited to the construction; the people had changed too. The once-predominantly black neighborhoods were now occupied by different ethnic groups of people

who had migrated uptown to get their pieces of what was now considered prime real estate. It was as if they were the natives and he was now the outsider” (Foye, 2012, p. 121).

Though Shai and Animal are enemies, both are united in their concern over Harlem’s gentrification. To combat the problem, Shai invests money in a new local restaurant called “Daddy’s Kitchen.” The following excerpt comes from the restaurant’s grand opening, when Shai initially welcomes the patrons:

Shai was immediately met with applause and whistles. Daddy’s Kitchen was a decent-sized establishment, but what it lacked in size it more than made up for in swag. There was a large two-way glass with the words Daddy’s Kitchen scrawled across it in gold letters. The two-way glass is so that people who valued their privacy could enjoy a nice meal without worrying about prying eyes, while still enjoying the view of the neighborhood. The spot would surely attract the cream of the socialite and underworlds, but it was also open to the people of the neighborhood. Daddy’s Kitchen was a place where regular folks could mingle with stars on a level playing field. All were welcome at Daddy’s Kitchen.

“This has been a long time coming,” Shai continued, “and it was no easy road we took to see it happen. When my father first brought the idea to the table of putting money into rebuilding Harlem, everybody thought that he was crazy. They said that the glory days of Harlem had come and gone and that it would be a waste of time and money to bother with it. As we stand here tonight on this special occasion in the midst of Internet cafés, less than two blocks from the prestigious Colombia University, I guess we see who was right in that debate.” The crowd laughed. [...] “I intend to keep putting money into the neighborhoods that I grew up to love so much until we restore the glory of Harlem, where we looked out for each other and keep the money in our neighborhoods. I intend to show the naysayers that the people who were born, raised, and live in these neighborhoods have just as much right to make their fortunes in them, if not more so, than the people who are only here to make money off it. After all, that is the American dream, isn’t it?” (Foye, 2012, p. 28–29)

Shai is a fictional “boss” and the restaurant he is opening is imaginary, but the gentrification he speaks to is an all-too-real issue for residents of Harlem. Harlem has deep historical and cultural significance for African-American and Latinx communities (Kinloch, 2009a). Columbia University has been a major gentrifying force in Harlem, and its influence has exerted tremendous pressure on long-time residents, particularly those with lower income levels. The

University has undertaken a “\$6.3 billion expansion” of its campus in a “17-acre area west of Broadway and north of 125th Street” which will “include laboratories, housing, and arts, science, and business facilities (Moore, 2014). These changes leave people wondering what the future holds for this place that anchors many people’s identities and cultures. “Philip,” a high school student who participated in a place-making video project on Harlem gentrification, asked: Where are the people gonna go, the ones who might be displaced cause they can’t afford the high rent? What’s gonna happen to Harlem and places like the Apollo? Why aren’t more people talking about the changes, taking a stand?” (Kinloch, 2009b, p. 326)

Street fiction novels like *Animal* may offer one forum for grappling with Phillip’s questions. The reality in the “Daddy’s Kitchen” passage goes beyond the facts of gentrification to capture many residents’ emotions and attitudes about it. The sense of longing for a return to Harlem where long-time African-American and Latinx residents are in charge of their own community is real for many, as is the struggle to establish and support businesses owned by people of color. A walk up 125th Street reveals more chain stores and restaurants every year as mom-and-pop businesses try to survive. The Daddy’s Kitchen scene may be aspirational, but it is not impossible. The scene is rooted in the real, yet its fictive elements open up a space to ponder Harlem’s future. While this passage and others like it cannot solve the problems presented by gentrification, the interwoven real and imagined elements of this scene may contribute to a greater awareness of both the complications and the feelings it incites for those who are most affected by it.

Street fiction is a diverse genre and the level of commitment to realism varies from text to text. Some stories tether themselves sparingly to the real, using it more as a background while allowing fantasy to drive the story. Others, like the novels included in this study, blend fantasy

with reality, sometimes with the goal of exposing problems that affects urban communities. Reading a street fiction novel like *Picture Me Rollin'*, for instance, requires attention to social and political issues as much as it necessitates attention to its fictive elements. Through her writing, Sofia Quintero calls on readers to use layered literacies and linguistic awareness in meaning-making. Her extensive work with young people in various educational settings has taught her to expect a high level of engagement from her readers as they explore the bricolage of the real and imagined in her novels:

One of the most impressive things about young people is how inventive they are with language. They are always exploring and pushing the boundaries of language. Since my young adult novels are in the realm of urban realism, it only makes sense to attempt to capture that linguistic genius. I don't fret about it dating my stories because, one, I actually like the time capsule effect and, two, I still think that even though things may change and language evolves, a good story stands the test of time because at its core it has something to say about the human condition and social contracts, rather than trends or events. Being that *Show and Prove* [one of Quintero's other novels] is set in the summer of 1983 in the South Bronx, I wanted to be able to provide brief explanations of certain things without slowing down the pace of the story. It's actually more of a cultural dictionary than an online glossary because it contains more than just terms. You can look up people, events, and concepts. I also liked the idea of making the novel more interactive since youth today prefer visual media and have high degrees of digital literacy. If they're reading the novel on a tablet, or their smartphone is always within reach, I might as well take advantage of it and use it to keep them reading. (The Center for Fiction)

Novels like Quintero's encourage readers to look more carefully at the world around them by encoding the "real" in language, references to place, markers of culture, familiar tropes or characters, and sociopolitical conditions. The novels also usher readers into imaginary realms where it is safe to explore dangerous or complex situations. Meaning-making in street fiction can be a dynamic process of vacillating purposefully between reality and fantasy if the texts are written to support it and if readers are open to it.

Any discussion of the real in street fiction must acknowledge that, while there are horrific

obstacles faced by many of the characters, some of the authenticity of the genre comes through in positive realities as well. Little moments from the lives of the characters add up to create authenticity in the stories, and the way characters speak, what they eat and how they dress offers an insight into the performance of cultures, genders, and mindsets that make up some of the mosaic of Black and brown urban American experiences. A group of young women go out to eat at a Brooklyn barbecue to blow off steam after a long week, siblings sit together in a Harlem apartment to watch a movie, a mom makes dinner and helps her son with his homework in Washington, D.C., a man uses clever wordplay to flirt with a woman he hasn't seen since high school. Love, friendship, and loyalty, particularly when they are depicted in adverse circumstances like those in the plots of most of the novels, let the characters' humanity shine through. In *Dirty Red*, for instance, Mekel and Red's friend, Kera, painstakingly cultivate a loving relationship for one another after a fling results in Kera's pregnancy. The bond between Esperanza and Dulce in *Picture Me Rollin'* is profound, and though they frequently argue in true sisterly fashion, they are unflinching in their support for one another. Snow and Adele share a special partnership in *Snow*, and the strength of their marriage is a major impetus for leaving a life of crime behind. Snow's mother, who tries desperately to keep her son from harm, is caring and tender. As Sofia Quintero attests, some authors of street fiction take great care to include positive aspects interlaced with the grittiness in their stories:

I came of age in the Bronx during the '80s, and most of what you hear about that place in time is very negative. But while we were growing up amid the twin epidemics of crack and HIV/AIDS, in the crosshairs of Reaganomics and surrounded by poverty, drugs and violence, there was also so much resilience and vibrancy in the 'hood. I mean, in the context of all that socio-political shit, we created hip-hop. That could not have been possible if all we had was despair. We still loved, we still played, we still hoped, we still imagined and created. This is why three decades and as many degrees later, I still write about neighborhoods like where I grew up. There is as much to celebrate in those places despite all the oppression the residents face. ([Reichard, 2016](#))

The novels I selected for this study feature characters who are caught up in a complex web of realities and fantasies—positive, negative, and everything in between—because “realism depends on artifice and fiction to create its narrative thrust” (Dyson, 2007, p. 12). Critical assessment of street fiction that only acknowledges the aspects of the novels that may be perceived as negative, like the “poverty, drugs, and violence” Quintero mentions, lacks attention to the efforts some writers have made to artistically capture human feelings or experiences such as love for a family member, jealousy, the desire for revenge, lust, or excitement about a new friendship. These eminently human aspects of the stories connect them to other genres and modes of storytelling, giving street fiction novels the possibility to be deemed appealing by anyone with whom the themes resonate. Simultaneously, just as the novels may speak to various general aspects of the human condition, they also have a specificity rooted in the settings and the identities of the characters, which is important for readers who are looking to a particular point of view of urban relegation. Even so, while street fiction opens an important pathway for increasing the number of Black and brown urban voices in the contemporary landscape of fiction, no single group of stories is representative of all of the vastly different experiences, tastes, and attitudes of Black and brown people living in American cities.

As to the harsher realities in street fiction, the novels vary in their capabilities of presenting social problems in ways that invite critical reimaginings. The texts often offer insight into the social, political and cultural forces that shape the protagonist’s (and perhaps the reader’s) perspectives. One of the very “real” problems that protagonists frequently encounter in street fiction is that of appropriate familial support. Like classic European fairy tales such as the *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (Perrault, 1697), many street fiction characters grow up

missing a mother, a father or sometimes both parents, leaving the child to make his or her own way in the world. In literary analysis, the trope of the missing parent(s) is often a vehicle for independence; the protagonist must rely on his own intellect and talents to handle adversity. Apart from the literary convenience of the missing parent(s), it is necessary to consider the significance of the social, historical, political, and cultural context that made this trope relevant long ago, and why it is ostensibly important in street fiction today.

In Perrault's time, death in childbirth was a common occurrence, and men who lost their wives typically remarried (Weber, 1981). Hence, the stepmother was often featured in folktales or fairytales when the ideal family structure is disrupted. In some of the street fiction I have read, parents are missing from their children's lives for reasons such as incarceration, the need to work long hours at a job, or drug addiction (Jasper, 2007; Black Artemis, 2006; Blue, 2004). Street fiction has the opportunity to delve beyond the surface of complex issues, and some novels do attempt to address them in a critical manner.

In *Picture Me Rollin'*, Esperanza and her sister, Dulce, have lived on their own in New York since they were both young because their mother is in prison in California for killing an abusive partner in self-defense. In *Snow*, Andre (a.k.a. Snow) is raised by a working single mother, and his father was incarcerated for theft. In *Dirty Red*, Red's mother ignores then flatly denies that her boyfriend sexually abused Red at the tender age of ten, at which point she encourages Red to leave home and not bother her with "lies." In *Picture Me Rollin'* and *Snow*, the trauma of the missing parent(s) are treated as difficult obstacles that affect the protagonists' futures and their selfhood. In *Dirty Red*, the graphic abuse scenes sometimes feel voyeuristic and exploitative, and Red frequently (and at times, flippantly) uses the abuse as an excuse for all the "dirt" she does to other people, even though there are moments where she reflects deeply on the

scars she carries with her: “Red’s first encounter with sex was with a man who told her that he loved her; so every time a man was inside her, she felt wanted, needed and desired. This temporary high was like a drug for her. She craved it. [...] Red never had a father to touch the side of her face and say those assuring words: I love you. Instead, her first memory of hearing them was a perversion; therefore, she did what human nature calls for us to do. She went back to what is familiar. For Red, familiarity was pain” (Stringer, 2006, p. 93). Though the problem of the missing parent(s) is “real” in each of the aforementioned novels, I would argue the way it is presented in *Dirty Red* ultimately drains some power away from a serious and potentially compelling aspect of the narrative. The sense of exploitation I feel when reading Stringer’s abuse passages is the same one I get when I read a John Green or a Jodi Picoult novel centered on characters living with terminal illnesses. While Vickie Stringer’s handling of it may be less artful, each of the authors does treat the missing parent(s) in a way that show the complex circumstances that generate trauma as well as the emotional and psychological aftershock in people’s lives.

A study that reports “instances of child abuse or neglect among Black youth are three times higher than they are for their White peers” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2006), or a newspaper article noting that “66% of Black or African American children live in single-parent households” (Kids Count Data Center, 2015) provides virtually no context for the underlying sociopolitical problems of minimized access to education, poverty, and criminalization that create an environment of inequity and place young people and their families at risk, not to mention the prevalence of racial bias in recording child abuse (Drake, Jolley, Lanier, et al., 2011). Street fiction, like hip-hop before it, often tells stories of survival, and while those stories may sometimes present violent sex scenes, unabashed misogyny and acts of terrible violence, even

problematic messages in the texts can be telling. Imani Perry wrote the following about the violence in hip-hop, and her words here easily extrapolate to street fiction: “[...] the fantasy must be understood as imagination, but the *longings driving that fantasy* [emphasis mine] for young Black men should enlighten us and motivate progressive social policy. [...] There is a dynamic relationship between our economic political, racial, gender and social position, how we process that existence and how we see it processed by the interpretive texts that surround us. The violent and misogynistic fantasies in hip hop are easily condemned, but the greater challenge is to reveal the *more human underlying longing* found in the music” (Perry, 2008, p. 171–172). Like Perrault’s tales, street fiction does not strive for scientific accuracy, but instead, it often touches on traumas, fears, or worries that impact some member of urban communities. Because of this, the novels have the opportunity to move beyond sociological data to a subtler understanding of issues like systemic racism, segregation, and incarceration.

Incarceration (or the threat of it) figures into almost all of the novels included in this study. Pervasive inequities in the criminal justice system and the increase in the severity of sentencing have led to Black and Latinx youth being both overrepresented and treated more harshly at every stage from arrest to parole (Hartney & Vuong, 2009). “In eleven states, at least one in twenty adult Black males is in prison. [...] African Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at a rate that is 5.1 times the imprisonment of Whites, [...] and] Latinos are imprisoned at a rate that is 1.4 times the rate of Whites” (The Sentencing Project, 2016, p. 3). Street fiction novels have an opportunity to grapple with some of the toll mass incarceration takes on the lives of individuals, families, and communities. For instance, *In Picture Me Rollin’*, Esperanza’s incarceration is linked directly to that of her mother, Brenda. Esperanza and Dulce were left without a caregiver when Brenda was jailed for killing her boyfriend after he repeatedly, brutally

beat her. Esperanza and Dulce revisit their mother's incarceration often during the novel, tracing its repercussions in their lives and imagining how things might be different if the justice system had treated their mother fairly. At the end of the novel, Esperanza visits her mother in a California prison. Esperanza endures the tedious, dehumanizing process of passing through security and waiting anxiously before she gets a brief, bittersweet moment with Brenda. Before she has to leave, Esperanza asks her mother, "Mami, do you ever regret what you did?" (Black Artemis, 2006, p. 243). Brenda responds: "When anybody makes it clear it's you or him, *negrita*, you always choose you [...] if I had done that from the start—the first time he called me a bitch, the first time he said I was nothing without him, the first time he forbade me to do something I knew was in the best interest of our family, the first time he hit me—I would never have had to kill him" (Ibid., p. 243–244). In *Snow*, the protagonist and his mother share a poignant moment when instead of bailing him out of jail, she tells him she can no longer help him now that he has broken the law, following in the footsteps of his convicted father. She says, "I told you not to be down there with them boys on the corner no more. But I also knew a boy shouldn't grow up alone, not the way you did. You needed a father, brothers, at least an uncle. But I didn't have none of that to give you. I did the best I could" (Jasper, 2007, p. 61) Scenes like this one show the human side of the United States' history of escalating criminalization of non-violent and drug offenses that began in the 1970s with Richard Nixon's efforts to use the law to stifle civil rights protesters (Brennan, 2016). Since then, incarceration rates in general, and particularly incarceration rates for Black people, have steadily increased, even during periods when crime rates declined (Alexander, 2010).

Like hip-hop before it, street fiction "gives a ground-level view of what it might mean to live under what are nearly warlike conditions in communities that face myriad daunting

circumstances” (Rose, 2008, p.135). The following excerpt from *Snow* shows the nuance and care some authors take in representing sensitive issues. In this passage, Snow recalls what being on the street meant to him. Though he knew it was wrong and dangerous, he craved the male camaraderie and the sense of purpose that came with his life as a drug dealer.

... And they listened to me. They said I was funny and smart, that I knew how to handle business. Their words went a long way to a kid with no friends and no father, nobody to show him how to be a man.

We never run out of things to talk about down there. The conversations would shift from movies and TV to girls around the way. Their eyes would glow at the mention of BMWs and Benzes or how many parts they were going to get cut in their hair the next time they hit the barbershop. The words filled the time while they waited. Then they made a sale. Then they waited again. That was the business from sunup to sundown. But the faces changed so quickly that I barely got a chance to get used to them. Some quit. Some got moved to other corners. Some died. Butchie had been the first one I remembered [...]

Butchie had gotten the corner after Alonzo. Then after Butchie came Archie. Then the raids started. Mayor Barry had put together a task force before he left office. When the smoked cleared, Troy was the last man standing, having beaten both the bullets and the boys in blue. And claiming victory over both, he ran six whole blocks from the very corner where it had all started on O Street all the way up to the library. “I don’t wanna see you down there again,” Ma threatened when my mostly As began to be sprinkled with Bs. “You understand?”

She didn’t have to lecture me. I knew that what they did out there was wrong. I saw the films and videos in school about what drugs did to people. And I saw all the boys who had died over who controlled the business that tore people apart. But my main man Ray was in the middle of it. And he had a different view of it all than Ma and I did, one which took the time to share with me at every opportunity.

“They ain’t got no chance,” he said of the hustlers we knew. “Some of ‘em got babies on the way, or don’t nobody work in their family. You can’t make no real money sellin’ shoes for five dollars an hour at Kinney’s.”

I knew he was full of shit from the beginning. But hearing him, say the words over and over again somehow got them to make sense to my young, impressionable mind. (Jasper, 2007, p. 44-45)

Snow emphasizes the relationships he made with other youth on the street showing how they filled a void in his life by helping him shape his identity. For Snow, the choice to participate in selling drugs is bound up with his desire to belong, which even overpowers his promises to his mother. By mentioning each of them by name—Butchie, Archie, and Ray—Snow makes the

tragedy of their deaths more personal. Snow communicates some of the challenges inherent in forming a Black masculine identity (Ferguson, 2001) in sites of urban relegation, along with a keen understanding of a near-universal desire among teenagers to feel a sense of belonging which is often expressed through participation in subcultures (Thompson and Bynum, 2016, p. 201). This kind of insight and compassion fosters a deeper, human-scale consideration of the complexities associated with mass incarceration. Problems like this cut deeply into the lives of urban communities, so having any lens through which one can see their effects is a humanizing act of resistance in the face of flattened, distorted images of “Black-on-Black crime” or the “inner city.” It is safe to say that not all street fiction books present issues surrounding incarceration with as much thoughtfulness as Jasper. For instance, in *Dirty Red*, Red’s ex-boyfriend, Bacon, is in prison on a twenty-year sentence, but midway through the novel, he is quickly released thanks to DNA evidence his highly-qualified attorney presents to the court. Bacon has enough clout with the guards to arrange to have sex with Red in the women’s bathroom during one of her visits. While Red dislikes visiting Bacon in prison, her displeasure comes mostly from her romantic disinterest in him; the setting of their conversation seems to carry little weight. As *Dirty Red* shows, simply putting prison elements in a narrative does not mean a text offers cutting-edge social critique of mass incarceration. However, as authors like Kenji Jasper and Black Artemis demonstrate, street fiction books can invite the reader toward a “conscious participation” (Greene, 1995) in important issues.

Since they are commodities, the realism or authenticity in the novels is constructed in the interactions among authors, publishers and readers. As I explained in chapter two, several street fiction authors have discussed the role of the publisher in shaping the content of the books. In a 2009 interview, Sofia Quintero remarked:

[...] It drives me crazy when someone tells me how to be Latina. I remember an editor passing on *Explicit Content* (my first Black Artemis novel) giving the reason that my character Leila didn't feel Latina to her because she didn't have a family. The assumption was this narrow, almost academic notion of what a Latino family can look like. The truth was that Leila did have family, but they did not step up to care for her so she was placed into foster care. Growing up I had a half-dozen foster sisters all of whom were Latina as are 28 percent of the children in New York City's foster care system. But because a half century ago, some White anthropologists said, "Latinos tend to have large families with multiple generations living in the same household," now someone whose family doesn't fit that structure is somehow not Latino enough. I also think that as a Latina writing commercial, urban fiction, the industry is at a loss of how to market my work as Black Artemis. I was born and raised in New York City in a working-class family and that upbringing shapes my work: the kind of stories I want to tell, the way my characters speak, the issues they encounter, etc. So I'm not writing the literary novel with the family saga that starts on the island, spans several generations and ends in the American metropolis with heavy doses of magical realism along the way. That is what too many narrowly associate with Latino literature. There is a part of this that is gendered, as well. I'm a huge fan of authors like Ernesto Quinonez and Abraham Rodriguez, Jr. and consider them among my influences. But there is a certain way that when a man of color writes about the urban, working-class experience (and not necessarily an immigrant experience at that), his narrative is automatically deemed credible. Here I come along writing from that perspective as a woman—a Latina at that—and folks are like, "Why is she writing that?" The implication is that these narratives are only legitimate if they come from men and/or African Americans. Ironically, the first readers to embrace me wholeheartedly have been African American women, and that doesn't surprise me, and I don't take that support for granted. (Nix, 2009)

Unwilling to accept limited expectations of Latina literature, Quintero refused to alter her novel to suit this particular publisher's expectations. Fortunately for Quintero and her readers, there are now a number of independent and mainstream publishers who express a desire to bring a variety of stories to the marketplace (Patrick, 2012). Yet Quintero's experience shows that there is sometimes a push and pull between authors and publishers that can alter the way "reality" is conceptualized by an author and presented in a finished work. While some publishers may approach street fiction with an open mind, others may use stereotypical assumptions of "street" life as a guide to what will sell (Nix, 2008), thereby limiting the range of possibilities for the genre. Readers, then, play an important role in signaling the kind of authenticity they expect

from the novels. During his career, K'wan Foye has noticed a shift in readers preferences. He says those who may have been content in the early 2000s just to have any kind of "street" stories now have more discerning tastes:

A lot of major publishing houses that you go into, when you give them the story, their first question is, "Well can you street it up a little bit?" On the flipside of that, the way they were throwing money away around 2003 when they were snapping up all the "Ghetto Talent," they're not doing it like that anymore. What they're realizing is that the hype is over. So now, if your story can't stand on its own, they can't sell it. A couple years ago you could've written a bum novel, slapped some fancy paper on it and a cover and sold about 40,000 copies of it. You can't do that anymore because the readers are waking up. The readers are getting wiser. Now you have to stand on more of your talent than just your storytelling ability as opposed to this cover with a girl with her butt out, or whatever you feel was eye catching and appealing at the time. The chicken heads are coming home to roost. (Urban Book Source, 2006)

If some of the excitement, energy and power of street fiction rests in its ability to open up spaces for heretofore untold stories in marginalized urban communities, that feature of the genre must be continuously cultivated by writers, readers and publishers in order maintain its uniqueness.

Just as reality comes to bear on street fiction in important ways, so, too does fantasy. In her explorations of Africanism in American literature, Toni Morrison remarked that the "subject of the dream is the dreamer" (17). The Freudian concept that one's fantasies reveal one's subconscious (or conscious) desires or anxieties is relevant to the ostensibly over-the-top elements in street fiction. One finds fantastic action scenes with violent shoot-outs or explosions, detailed accounts of sexual encounters, descriptions of clothes, stacks of cash, extravagant cars, high-end homes and consumer goods in most novels in the genre. The fantastic is often the domain of popular genres such as detective, horror, science fiction, or romance novels. Each of these genres depend on their "own interior set of ground rules" which is "fundamental to the aesthetic experience" of reading (Rabkin, 1976). In the realm of popular fiction, fantasies entertain and make space for play in the minds of readers; they are a kind of imaginative

breathing room for the reader who may wish to let loose. Images of plenty and excess allow the reader to experience the pleasure of abundance vicariously. Even more powerfully, when fantastic elements are handled by a capable writer, they can also make space for remaining complex concepts without the strictures of the laws of nature and the world around us.

Sociologists have a decades-long history of documenting urban poverty in the United States, so its ill effects on inhabitants of low-income urban neighborhoods are a matter of record. According to a recent interview with Harvard University Professor William Julius Wilson, “the loss of manufacturing jobs, the movement of jobs from cities to the suburbs and overseas, and even greater internationalization of the economy [...] the expansion of low-wage jobs lacking fringe benefits, and the polarization between high-wage and low-wage occupations” are a few of the many forces that have contributed to the increase in urban poverty since the year 2000 (Allen, 2014). As prices rise, jobs become more scarce or more specialized, and gentrification drives up rent prices, making ends meet in American cities becomes more difficult than ever. People at near- or below- poverty levels in areas of urban relegation face the cruel paradox of living in some of the wealthiest cities in one of the world’s wealthiest countries while they deal with financial struggles.

Many aspects of fantasy help relieve the pressure of this paradox by providing an imagined space where the reader can experience the trappings of wealth for the price of a paperback. Name brands of items like handbags or designer sunglasses are prevalent in street fiction, and they serve as a marker of status and wealth for the characters. Consider the following moment in *Dirty Red* when Red re-gifts a number of baby toys to her pregnant friend, Kera, after having received the gifts from her boyfriend when she faked her own pregnancy: “There was a stroller, a high chair, a tabletop baby seat, cases of diapers, OshKosh B’Gosh clothing, small

baby sleepers, T-shirts, and cases of Enfamil. It looked like Santa Claus had stopped by[...] Red knew the value of kids' items was high, but she just didn't want to bother with the Toys 'R' Us and Babies 'R' Us stores (Stringer, 2006, p. 112). The sheer quantity of items in this list is impressive, but even more fantastic is Red's cavalier attitude toward the value of the goods. Red's "game" is so effective that the money represented by the baby items in this list is no longer significant to her; a detail which certainly moves into the realm of the fantastic. Brand-named goods and luxury items are peppered through Red's story, inviting readers take pleasure in imagining the wealth that Red has at her disposal.

Though the pleasurable fantasy seems to occur often in the genre, street fiction also offers moments of fantasy that are critical reimaginings. The example I offer here is from *Picture Me Rollin'*. Esperanza identifies with rapper Tupac Shakur; she watches every documentary about him, knows the words to all of his songs, and hangs up his posters on the walls of her room. For her, Tupac is a kind of saint who faced the same contradictions in his life as she does in hers. In this scene, Esperanza restlessly falls asleep after reading passages of bell hooks' *All About Love*. Esperanza imagines meeting Tupac on a beach in Cuba where the two of them discuss the representations of women in Tupac's lyrics (which were both lauded for respecting important women in his life and criticized for misogyny). Here, Esperanza confronts him about the irreconcilable differences in his songs' messages.

"It's just that you write all those cool songs for the sistas, you know, like 'Keep Ya Head Up' and 'Can U Get Away'; then outta nowhere it's like we're all bitches, tricks, and hos. . ."

"You know I'm not talkin' about all women when I say that. I'm certainly not talkin' about you Espe, and you know that. Why do you take it that way?"

"That's what alla y'all rappers say. That's some bullshit excuse I expect to hear from Snoop and 'em. You supposed to know better than that, Pac." He conceded with a slight nod. "I mean, if that's true, and y'all are only talking about certain women, then why's that the only kinda women we ever hear y'all talking about? Why you spend so

much time writing rhymes about them of they're so bad, like those the only women you know? Like a sista never showed you love. I don't know, Pac. When I hear that shit, it still hurts me. It's like when you say that about one sista---even if it's true---you're sayin' that about alla us." Esperanza placed her hand on Tupac's knee. Remember when you said to old folks that no matter what they think of you, you're still their child, and they just can't turn you off like that?"

"Yeah?"

"Well no matter what you think of a woman, she's still your sister. Or your mama or wifey or whatever. Point is, you can't turn her off like that."

Pac placed his hand over hers, looked into her eyes, and said, "You're right, and I'm sorry."

Esperanza leaned on him, and he put his other arm around her shoulder. And as much as she didn't want to---she just couldn't help it---she cried and cried and cried. And Pac cried with her. (Artemis, 2005, p. 50)

This tender scene between Tupac and Esperanza makes space for a loving confrontation over a painful and problematic issue that is important to Esperanza, but that also resonates with any woman who enjoys hip-hop music. The outcome for both Tupac and Esperanza is catharsis. Apart from being an incredibly layered intertextual moment (drawing on knowledge of bell hooks, Tupac, and Snoop Dogg), the fantasy opens up a space for dialogue, for soothsaying, that is not always readily available in the real world. Of course, Tupac is already dead when this scene takes place, so there would be no further opportunity to talk to him about the contradictions in his lyrics in real life. The dream allows the characters to move past the limitations of space and time to engage one another in conversation. More significantly, however, the scene shows a sympathetic critique of hip-hop offered by Esperanza, who is an insider in the culture, modeling how critical readers might also engage with representations they may find problematic in the world around them. The encounter between Esperanza and Tupac, though fictionalized, speaks to the possibility of "wounded healing" that takes place in street fiction. Wounded healing "neither presumes nor suggests a completed medical, psychological, or ideological recovery" but instead refers to the process of accessing "relief, support, empathy, and

critique” (Hill, 2009b, p. 274). Though this scene is impossible and fantastic, it is grounded in real issues and the critical, loving spirit of the message has a pedagogical implication for readers. There are fewer instances of these kinds of fantasies in street fiction than there are of fantasies of excess and pleasure, however, I believe they signal a potential for social critique and counter-hegemonic discourses within the genre.

Another instance of critical remaking stems from a desire for a renewed spiritual connection articulated by both Kenji Jasper and K’wan Foye. Both authors express a longing to explore a connection to a higher power in their novels. In the following interview excerpt, Jasper discusses the hypocrisy he witnessed among some of the people involved in the Baptist church he attended as a kid in Washington, D.C., and he touches on how he has used his writing to reimagine a new role for spirituality in his community. He says:

I spent a lot of my youth in church, you know in the Baptist church...I was immersed in it in a way because I came from parents who were really, really involved and didn’t allow a lot of things that some other parents did. [...] Most Black kids, even if it’s on the fringes, we find our way in and out of the church, but that’s a surface level of it, [...] It was really important to me to illustrate a young person’s journey and how God plays a role in that, particularly because it’s not the typical journey that I saw, and it was important to me to paint spirituality in a spiritual way and not in a religious way. I saw a lot of people practicing religion, but the spirituality element of it, you know, past catching the ghost, past getting really excited when the choir sang their song, sometimes escapes people. You know, the Bible was a thing that you lived by, but the part of it being the living word seemed like a lot of folks forgot about. Especially at a time when right outside of the church’s doors, young men were being gunned down every night and there wasn’t outreach and there wasn’t really an attempt to bring them in other than, you know, altar prayer. [...] In my own kind of way, I always found myself in some moment opening that door to the church and to God or to that higher power that my characters always rejected or denied then had to deal with the consequences one way or the other. (Turpin, 2013)

In *Animal*, Kwan Foye offers a discussion of spirituality and philosophy in this scene between Animal and the mysterious priest he meets in a church he wanders into in Harlem. Animal is

walking the streets, feeling lost, waiting to make the next move on Shai and his crew for hurting his girlfriend, Gucci.

Animal quietly made his way down the aisle, eyes fixed on a stained glass mural that depicted Jesus Christ which hung over the podium at the front of the church. It was the only thing in the entire place that didn't seem to have been touched by time and neglect. The ruby eyes seemed to bore into the killer accusingly, as if the mural could see his sin-laden soul.

Animal sneered at the mural. "Who the fuck are you to judge me?" [...]

He was tall with a cleanshaven head and thick goatee that was sprinkled salt and pepper. He wore a black army jacket and blue jeans tucked into a pair of black combat boots. A black leather patch covered his right eye, but you could see the scar beneath that stretched from just above his brow to his cheek. A silver rosary swayed slightly in his left hand.

"Fuck is you the police or something?" Animal drew the gun [from his waistband], looking frantically from side to side as if at any minute the church would be swarmed with law enforcement.

"Easy," the man said, holding his hands so that they were visible. The rosary rattled in his trembling left hand while he reached for the collar of his jacket with his right. Carefully, he pulled his jacket open so that Animal could see the white priest's collar that snaked around his neck. "There's no need for that."

"So says you. I'd rather have it and not need it than to need it and not have it." Animal tucked the gun.

"Or you can remove yourself from situations that leave you such limited choices," the priest countered.

"News flash for you, old-timer, in the ghetto, you play the hand you're dealt, and you play to win. Being a man of the cloth I wouldn't expect you to know much about hood politics." Animal flopped on the tattered bench and cast his eyes back to the mural. The priest sat down next to him, but kept a safe distance.

"I think I know a thing or three about hood politics."

Animal looked over at the priest. "What? You gonna tell me how you, an ex-dope boy, found religion?"

"Nah, I never really had the patience to stand around selling drugs. My lane was a little faster, if you know what I mean." The priest shaped his fingers like a gun. "Gained some, lost more." He pointed to the patch over his eye.

Animal reflected on Gucci. "I know all about losses."

"Money or a woman?"

"What?"

"It's either money or a woman that's got you sitting in a church with a gun looking like you're planning on doing something you're probably gonna regret."

"I'm planning on doing a lot, Padre, but I highly doubt if I'll regret any of it. Sometimes the principles of a thing outweigh the repercussions."

The priest nodded. "Talking like that, I'm guessing it's a woman. Only a lady can send a man on a kamikaze mission and have him convince himself that it actually makes

sense. Love comes and goes, kid, but you won't be able to be there to catch it the second time if you throw your life away over some broad."

"What the fuck does a priest know about love? Ain't all you muthafuckas virgins or something?" Animal said mockingly.

The priest smirked. "It's like I told you; I haven't always been a priest, and even my long walk with the Lord hasn't been without its detours. Love is a double-edged sword. It can be a gift from God or a curse from the devil, all depending on how you chose to wield it. When in doubt," he shrugged, "leave it in God's hands."

Animal snorted. "That's a fucking laugh. So far, leaving things in God's hands hasn't done much for me but making sure that I'm on the short end of the shit stick every time. God don't give a fuck about kids from the ghetto."

"God loves us all," the priest assured him.

"Then how come he don't love me?" Animal looked up at the priest. His eyes were moist, but he wouldn't let the tears fall in front of the stranger.

"Young man, I assure you—" the priest began but Animal cut him off.

"Assure me what? That God loved me when my family abandoned me to the streets and I had to eat trash to survive? Did he love me when he let my stepfather beat me until I shitted blood for a week? Or maybe he was just showing me love when he tried to take away the only thing I ever cared about?" Animal's sadness was replaced by rage.

"I'm sorry," the priest said sincerely. His heart truly went out to Animal.

"Not as sorry as my enemies will be when they're choking on their own blood." Animal stood to leave. The priest stood to block his path.

"Stand aside, old man. I'd hate to hurt a servant of the Lord, but don't think I won't if you try to get between me and my due." The priest ignored Animal's threat.

"Revenge is not the answer."

"Maybe not, but it's all I got left. Thanks for the chat, Padre." Animal stepped past him and headed for the church exit. When he was halfway there the priest called after him.

"Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord."

Animal looked up at the mural. "Not this time, Padre." He patted the gun on his hip. "Not this time." (Foye, 2012, p. 124-130)

Foye's writing in this scene in *Animal* directly addresses the same dynamics Jasper discusses in his interview. Animal initially approaches the priest with skepticism assuming he is a charlatan. The priest alludes to his own losses and mistakes, and in doing so, defies Animal's expectations to find judgment and hypocrisy inside the doors of the church. Once the priest reveals enough of his past to Animal to gain his trust, Animal begins to open up about his philosophy and hint at his desire for revenge. In the midst of his tough assertions, Animal nearly breaks down, as he expresses a longing for a connection to God, paired with a fear of being too hardened to ever find

a sense of spirituality. In defense of his vulnerability, Animal retreats to his revenge before making his way out of the church.

The conversation between Animal and the priest is a critical reframing of the relationship between religious organizations and young people like Animal. Even though it takes place in the pages of a novel rather than in the real world, the dialogue Animal and the priest engage in fulfill Kenji Jasper's wish to see the church made relevant in the lives of young people. The two characters part having had a genuine dialogue, even if they have not come to an agreement about the way one should see the world. At the end of the novel, the priest reveals he is an assassin Shai has hired to kill Animal. Because of his respect for Animal, the priest helps him fake his own death so that he and Gucci can be free. As sensational as that ending sounds, it is interesting to think about the role of spirituality (embodied by the priest) in Animal's redemption and rebirth.

Studies of popular fiction such as Radway's (1984) study of readings of romance novels offers us some valuable insights on the delicate balance between fantasy and representation of reality in street fiction. Her work shows romance novels needed to balance authenticity and fantasy in the *right* way for stories to remain compelling and consumable for readers. The threshold between the real and the imaginary specific to the genre opens the window for escapism of one's daily life while simultaneously providing a landscape in which the reader can negotiate "real" emotions or problems. Street fiction walks a similar line as it negotiates the real and the fantastic, and authors like Kenji Jasper know they must handle this boundary with care:

I think violence is a very big part of our lives. It almost always brings about change. And that's the way that I try to use it in my writing. If you're going to spray someone with bullets I feel like there has to be a point to it. But I'm just one guy with a pen out of many. Each and every writer deservedly had their own take on how to or not to use it in his or her work. [...]

I'm a fan of balancing frankness and discussion. You should know what a love interest's body looks like. But at the same time descriptions of thrusting and gyrating

don't to that much for your overall story. My take on sexuality is to try and give the reader a few crisp and still photographs, moments that they'll remember instead of short pornographic films. (Jasper, 2017)

The genre's readers expect authentic engagement with social and political issues that emerge from systemic racism and urban relegation, yet like all readers of fiction, they enjoy moments of escape and departure that fantasy affords them. Still, elements of the fantastic or of excess must be kept in balance against authenticities.

As I consider the relationship between the fantastic and the real in street fiction, I return to Bakhtin's theories about the novel as a "zone of contact" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 33). Bakhtin explains that part of what makes novels unique is their "relationship with extra literary genres, with the genres of everyday life and with ideological genres" (Ibid.). In street fiction, the sociological conditions of life on the streets comprise one set of "texts" that the stories depend on, the fantasies of the characters (who serve as surrogates for the primary target audience of the stories) another. Bakhtin writes:

Since it is constructed in a zone of contact with the incomplete events of a particular present, the novel often crosses the boundary of what we strictly call fictional literature—making use first of a moral confession, then a philosophical tract, then of manifestos that are openly political, then degenerating into the raw spirituality of a confession, a "cry of the soul" that has not yet found its formal contours [...] After all, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between literature and nonliterature and so forth are not laid up in heaven [...] These symptoms of change appear considerably more often in the novel than they do elsewhere [...] because the novel is the vanguard of change. The novel may thus serve as a document for gauging the lofty and still distant destinies of literature's future unfolding (Ibid).

As some street fiction texts vacillate between the real and the fantastic, they place the two realms in conversation with one another. That liminal state is a place where the "real" can be both escaped and negotiated anew; where imaginaries are possibilities (Sumara, 1996). The act of reading a street fiction text locates the reader on the threshold, simultaneously affirming, probing,

questioning, and pushing past reality. Street fiction that succeeds in doing this creates an opportunity for critical perspective on the world. While there are street fiction authors who concern themselves less with injecting social and political consciousness into their writing, authors like Sofia Quintero see it as a responsibility. She states: “It has always been my personal mission to bring substantive sociopolitical issues to commercial media. This is my cultural activism, my contribution to creative resistance. We should know by now that entertainment is not apolitical. Fictional stories that can preach beyond the converted have the power to not only complicate what we believe to be real but also to imagine what’s possible” (Reichard, 2016). Street fiction validates the world of the streets, and this “...validation empowers the reader to be open to negotiating the reading of their personal worlds, with an entry into synthesis, analysis, and evaluation of their environment, the people in it, as well as their own location and interaction within their lived world. In street lit, the streets signify their stories back to the people of the streets [...] the pure act of reading ignites a revelatory connection between what was previously viewed (or read) as scary, confusing, or even as entertainment to a critical lens of person interpretation. Once this bridge has been made, readers’ worldview broadens and they then ask critical and nuanced questions” (Morris, 2011).

Chapter Five: Street Fiction and English Education

This dissertation ends where I originally thought I would begin: with street fiction texts in the English classroom. Throughout the research process, I learned that a discussion of the pedagogy of street fiction needs to be grounded in reframed articulation of the genre and some of its themes, and that is what I have attempted to present in the previous chapters. By way of a conclusion, I will explain the valuable perspectives street fiction brings to several key questions in English education, and I will suggest some promising avenues for future research with the genre.

Goin' Places: The Future of Street Fiction

The recontextualization of street fiction I offer in chapter two presses educators and critics to take a second look at the genre, the best examples of which offer depth beyond the provocative titles and cover art that might first grab one's attention. One cannot look at street fiction without considering its literary, political, cultural and historical roots. Street fiction does not wholly constitute African American literature, but as I hope to have demonstrated, it does share a number of features and framing principles, especially when it comes to carving out a rhetorical space to assert Black identities and testify to Black experiences of systematic oppression. Locked into a dialogical relationship to White American culture, the imagined community (Anderson, 2006/1983) of the 'hood presses back against the marginalization of its stories lest they be suppressed. Though street fiction writers often provide narratives of resistance like their hip hop predecessors, they too fall prey to the consumerism, misogyny, and self-centeredness and lust for power that are as intimately bound to the American psyche as the notions of freedom and justice. Black and Latinx authors who once "made a way out of no way"

to self-publish their novels are now simultaneously blessed and cursed with six-figure book deals from a White-dominated publishing industry, and it remains to be seen whether the “professionalization” of street fiction will open up new possibilities for better craft and more variation in storytelling, or contribute to a homogenization of the narratives for the purpose of capitalizing financially on the genre’s popularity. The tensions that arise as a result of the “double-voiced discourse” as it is represented through the “heteroglossia” (Bakhtin, 1981) of street fiction novels is likely to remain at the heart of the genre, as will the “me-against-the-world” stance of the protagonists of most of the novels.

Ultimately, readers and writers hold the future of street fiction in their hands. The intimate relationship between readers and writers created by this genre puts them in the privileged position of deciding what direction the genre will take. Will writers focus more on the pleasure over-the-top fantasy and impossible dramas, or will they follow in the more socially and politically conscious footsteps of Donald Goines, Sister Souljah, and Sapphire? There is already a call from within the genre for writers to avoid stereotyping characters, exploiting the same old plot lines, and neglecting responsibilities of editing and craftsmanship. Thanks to social media, online book reviews, and street fiction blogs and websites writers and readers can readily exchange information and opinions about new material, and authors continue to find new ways of connecting with their audiences without relying on traditional publishing. For instance, Sofia Quintero recently launched a serial, multimedia street fiction story called the *Ankh-Right Chronicles* (2017) through her Facebook page and on her website. Quintero blends narration, dialogue, text messages and Facebook posts exchanged between characters, videos, and photos to tell a tale of intrigue and deception set in the world of the hip hop music industry. With the proliferation of e-books, even unknown writers have a shot at finding an audience, which makes

street fiction a surprisingly democratic space for cultivating new voices. A new crop of authors interested in using fiction to discuss issues like race and police brutality benefit from the channels that have been opened by street fiction. Twenty-nine year-old Angie Thomas, for instance, recently penned a young adult novel called *The Hate U Give* about Oscar Grant, III, an unarmed, twenty-two year-old African American man shot to death by a White transit officer at a train station in Oakland in 2009 (Alter, 2017a). Thirteen publishers expressed immediate interest in the novel, Fox 2000 rushed to purchase the movie rights, and over 100,000 copies of the book are already in circulation (Ibid.). Jason Reynolds and Brandon Kiely teamed up to write *All American Boys*, a young adult novel about an African American boy who is assaulted by a police officer after he is racially profiled (Alter, 2017b). After selling more than “120,000 copies” of the book (Alter, 2017b), the two authors have visited more than “100 schools around the country” where they have spoken to roughly “40,000 students” about their novel (Alter, 2017a). Even if the publishing industry co-opts street fiction to some degree, writers are in a powerful position to use a variety of media to tell stories that speak to contemporary issues in American life while also connecting to age-old literary themes.

Pedagogical Propositions: Thoughts on the Implications of Street Fiction in the Classroom

Street fiction is a relatively broad category of fiction which has been percolating for the past twenty years, so it is safe to say there is enough material within the genre to satisfy the interests of a wide range of readers for both academic and pleasure reading. Educators could choose to disregard the entire genre for its misogyny, violence, sex, and illicit activities, yet by doing so, they miss opportunities to use street fiction for meaningful classroom conversations about a variety of questions central to the discipline of English. However, using street fiction in

educational settings is not as simple as swapping *Hold U Down* for *Huckleberry Finn* in the course syllabus. Teachers must be prepared (as they should be for any text they plan to teach) to teach with a sense of rootedness to concepts, contexts, cultures and theories surrounding the text at hand. In other words, street fiction may be popular, but it should not be taken lightly. Here, I will offer some thoughts about how street fiction might inform several areas of inquiry central to English.

Teaching street fiction: Where (not) to begin. When I speak with English teachers interested in bringing street fiction to the classroom, the first question they usually ask me is: “which books should I use?” To me, this well-intentioned question seems like the wrong place to begin, as it places fear of choosing texts that are too “racy” or “poorly-written” for classrooms at the center of the dialogue. Furthermore, classrooms, like any community, have their own standards and goals, and I would not be able to answer the question of which text to use without first understanding the educational context framing the selection. The reasons for reading street fiction are just as important as the content of the novels, so educators might benefit from some soul-searching about how and why they plan to use street fiction before they incorporate it into their lessons. If it is just to cash in on something that seems “cool” or “popular,” educators may want to rethink their choice. It is important to center the conversation about the pedagogical use of street fiction on what one hopes to achieve or highlight by studying the genre rather than a desire to “protect” students from it. The themes and issues present in many street fiction novels deserve serious, nuanced attention, and as I hope this dissertation shows, teachers and students benefit from bringing multiple sociological, cultural, and theoretical tools to their readings of street fiction. Choosing the right tools means first identifying the “big questions” street fiction

might help answer. If educators shift toward beginning their study of street fiction with one or more questions that connect it to the core of the discipline of English, they better position themselves and their students for rich readings of the texts. Some pertinent questions linking street fiction with English education include: 1) What is “literariness” and how does a text become “literature”? 2) What is the ideal relationship between readers and writers? 3) How do texts shape and/or reflect identities, cultures? 4) What purpose does the writing of fiction serve in people’s lives? 5) How does a book come to be? What does it mean to see a book as culture? As a commodity? While educators could use a variety of texts to help students make inroads toward answers to these queries, I suggest street fiction brings something fresh to discussions situated at the heart of the English discipline.

(Re)negotiating literature and literariness with street fiction. When he created the ideal content and structure of his reimagined course of study he calls “pacesetter English,” Robert Scholes wrote about the discipline’s unfortunate preoccupation with literariness. He wrote: “I cannot accept uncritically the idea of literature as a uniquely privileged form of transcendental textuality. [...] For the study of theory in a discipline called English, this situation means that the question of universal literary values should be very squarely on the table, with the stakes clearly delineated. Understanding the category of literature as a problem—and a problem with a history—is part of what every serious student of English should know” (1998; p. 151). The controversies surrounding street fiction show that the genre raises key questions about what people value in works of fiction. Because of this, studies of street fiction undertaken with an awareness of “literariness” as a mutable, subjective quality influenced by political, social and cultural factors can lead students to a healthier relationship with “literature.” The choices

teachers make about the texts that are “literary,” or worthy of study in their classrooms, speaks volumes to young people. English educators run the risk of equating “literature” with a limited selection of texts written mostly by White men who lived long ago in far away places, students may come away with rigid ideas about literature that make it feel dead, irrelevant, or inaccessible. In my opinion, English teachers have a responsibility to show that people shape canons; they are ever in flux because as people change, so do their cultures, ideologies, and tastes. Using street fiction to map literary values and chart progressions of a text from “popular” to “literary” would go a long way toward adding depth and breadth to students’ grasp of literariness, and it would help illuminate the hidden power dynamics that forge canons in the first place.

Street fiction authors like Kenji Jasper are keenly aware of how their work relates to other texts deemed “literary.” Jasper notes that some writers in the genre blur the lines between high and low cultural productions, literary and popular texts, and “the street and the Academy” (Turpin, 2013). Of himself and other writers like him, Jasper remarked:

We didn’t have the kind of credentials for say, the *New York Times* to get excited about us. I was fortunate that I had a good article in the *Post* style section, but the *Washington Post* book department would never touch me, they never have. I’m just making the point that for me as a kid who had clipped the *Post* who had clipped the *Times* who really aspired to be like the local authors who had careers...I just wanted to be on the team. [...] At a point in my first book tour, I was paired up with Colson Whitehead around the time that *John Henry Days* had come out. And that book was the big rage in New York, everyone thought it was the biggest thing since sliced bread, and I met Colson, and he was really, really, kind of academic...he’s a certain kind of guy. He’s not my kind of guy...[interviewer laughs] No, no, no I’m not dissing him at all. [...] I just kind of gathered that, you know, being a Harvard guy, his idea was that, [...] even though he was from Fort Greene, Brooklyn, (and you know, not the Fort Greene of now)...he was probably staying in the house to keep from catching the bullets that were flying everywhere. His value of what I was doing wasn’t equal to his. And at the end of the day, there are probably a lot more people from the neighborhood where he grew up who know my work than who know his. But the tradeoff is that, in the book world, which is much like the Academy—sometimes I look at them as two sides of the same coin—getting entrance into that room can be very difficult. It takes time for things to cycle through the system. *Dark* came out in 2001—that was seven years after I came out of

high school. Things were still going on. I think if that book had come out now, a lot further down the road that the treatment that it would have gotten critically might have been different. I think for the better. I am not a begrudging person who spends all day thinking that they didn't give me any love, I'm just kind of like: 'well okay I'll move onto the next project'...I know that from those who read the work and those who understood the work, they really appreciated it and like what I was doing. (Turpin, 2013)

If students are taught to contextualize, historicize, and question how books come to be sanctioned in official spaces like the Academy or the classroom, perhaps they can help to answer Kenji Jasper's question about why Colson Whitehead's books gain entry to the canon while his books do not (Turpin, 2013). Giving students the tools and opportunities to shape their own theories about the quality of literariness and the characteristics of literature is a potentially empowering experience, and as educators like Rutgers University professor H. Bruce Franklin have already shown, street fiction may support these endeavors. In his brief but powerful essay "Can the penitentiary teach the Academy how to read?", Franklin describes his students' rousing debates about the definition of literature that began when he used Donald Goines' novel *Dopefiend* in his Crime and Punishment in American Literature course (2008). He explains:

Somehow this novel, with its deceptively simple surfaces, had plunged them into questions swirling around near the center of that maelstrom we call the culture wars: Is "great" literature distinguished by its timelessness and aesthetic excellence, or is the value of literature largely determined by its content? Are aesthetic standards expressions of class, gender, and ethnic values? Are complexity and ambiguity the hallmarks of literary excellence, or are simplicity and accessibility literary virtues? Most American prison literature, even such elegantly belletristic works as the poetry and essays of Jimmy Santiago Baca, forces us to view incarceration, social justice, and literacy from the bottom up instead of from the top down. The cruder but far more widely appealing kind of prison literature epitomized by the novels of Donald Goines also forces us to view fundamental questions about literature itself from the bottom up instead of from the top down. (Franklin, 2008; p. 648)

Franklin's comments show that street fiction's "deceptively simple surfaces" may make excellent terrain for disassembling some of the taken-for-granted-ness that so often comes with the

notion of “literature.” To preserve the relevance of English as a field of study, it seems important to make space for students hone skills necessary to join in conversations about questions of literature and literariness rather than merely preserving that privilege for members of the Academy. While street fiction novels are not the only popular texts that might encourage this kind of dialogue, the growing popularity of the genre and the importance of its themes makes it a viable place to start.

The “interpretive communities” of street fiction. The culture around street fiction novels has often created a particular relationship between authors and their audiences. In chapters two and four, I discussed the proximity and sense of authenticity (real or imagined) that is inherent in this relationship. Dr. Vanessa Morris describes the contract formed between the street fiction author and reader as “textual trust” (Morris, 2006). She explains: “When the reader decides to go past the book cover and the title, their choice to read the book implies that the reader trusts the author. Stories that relate to the reader in some way inspire this “textual trust,” which, in turn, is hermeneutically invested so that the reader reads through the book” (Ibid.). While I do not believe readers wholly surrender any sense of criticality from the moment they decide to read the text, my research with street fiction has led me to think there is something unique about the reader-writer relationship this genre often forges. When educators choose texts or design reading-based activities for classrooms (from street fiction or other genres) they may do well to consider what reading means to their students and what kind of relationships they hope to have with the texts they read.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that students from one neighborhood or one demographic read any body of texts (including street fiction) the same way. What I am arguing

is that street fiction makes the nature of the cohesion among readers and writers more transparent, and that this transparency can be useful to educators who wish to encourage young people toward greater power with texts—academic or otherwise. Many scholars have shown that reading is a contextualized act, and that cultures and identities inform how the act of reading figures into our lives and the way we make sense of texts (Sumara, 1996; Richardson, 2002; Fish, 1980; Heath, 1983; Radway, 1984; Hill, 2009a). Stanley Fish theorizes that readers and writers form an “interpretive community” who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing [creating meaning in] texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions” (Fish, 1980; p. 171). The limited number of ethnographic studies conducted with street fiction readers has demonstrated that the genre has established particular interpretive communities. For example, in her study of female prisoners who read street fiction, Megan Sweeney observed that some readers “use urban books as a template, a paint-by-numbers canvas that allows them to fill in characters' portraits with their own psychological interiority. These women assume authorial agency by essentially writing themselves into the narratives, adding layers of complexity and sometimes putting the stories to alternative uses. In this sense, the women engage in what José Esteban Muñoz calls a practice of ‘disidentification,’ which entails ‘tactically and simultaneously working] on, with, and against a cultural form’ in order to ‘invest it with new life’” (Sweeney, 2012, p. 162). In another study, Amy Brown read two street fiction texts in Freirean cultural circles with a group of five sixteen-year-old girls at the high school where she taught English. Her findings show that the participants “seemed to construct themselves in opposition to the idea of the ‘dumb’ or ‘materialistic’ young woman” they encountered on the pages of the novels, and that while they were capable of identifying and critiquing oppression they found in the texts, they did not

question meritocratic ways for individuals to overcome it (2011). Insight into these complex dynamics within the interpretive communities of street fiction can be valuable for educators who wish to encourage students to approach reading as a dynamic, context-dependent process where textual meaning is created rather than simply located. If they intend to teach young people who read street fiction, educators may benefit from thinking about the unique ways in which readers of the genre position themselves to texts, the authors, and to the act of reading itself, regardless of whether they plan to use texts from the genre in the classroom.

“It’s reality for me”: Street fiction texts as renderings of world(s). Any conversation about text selection in the English classroom begins with the needs of students. A number of students express a desire to read books that deal with real-world problems without easy resolutions that mirror facets of their own lives (Alsup, 2003). In order to advance academically and to grow as critical thinkers, some students need to build on “local literacies” contingent on the things in their lives that are close, relevant, and meaningful to them (Yagelski, 2000). Other students might benefit from using literature to build empathy for others, particularly “those remote [...] in temperament, in space, or in social environment” (Rosenblatt, 1995/1938, p. 261). Street fiction texts may serve both of these needs well since several of the novels grapple with timely social problems as they affect individual lives. As one teen reader said of the genre: “It’s reality for me” (Morris, 2011).

Robert Scholes insists that all students need “an education for a society still struggling to balance its promises of freedom and equality, still hoping to achieve greater measures of social justice, still trying not to homogenize its people but to allow for social mobility and to make the lower levels of its economic structure tolerable and humane” (1998; p. 84). While the genre does

not have definitive answers to the problems it portrays, street fiction can help educators open up human-scale dialogue with students about social injustices, the myth of American meritocracy, and systematic forces of oppression. Part of what draws readers to street fiction is the fact that the novels plunge headlong into the affective fallout that occurs when problems of contemporary social significance alter characters' lives. For evidence of this, consider the following review of *Snow* (Jasper, 2007) a reader posted on Amazon.com: "[...] Jasper captures the angst and horror of street life and the reluctance of an intelligent young person to participate but his environment doesn't permit it. Snow and his mother are well developed [sic] characters on opposite sides and it is easy to identify with both. His harsh descriptions of street life bring it alive for those who have no idea what that kind of life is like. SNOW is a book that should be read by anyone who thinks the street life is glamorous. It should especially be read by politicians and pundits who think they know what's really going on. They might come out with a different view of our society and perhaps be led to try to change the inequalities that are ripping this nation apart" (Holman, 2009). The reader's comments suggest the book is beneficial reading for those who identify with the characters (Snow or his mother), as well as those who need greater insight into "street life." Particularly in this era when young Black and brown men and women and their allies work to change the oppressive systems which curtail their basic human rights through platforms such as Black Lives Matter, students need texts that speak to the inequities present in the world, and while street fiction does not represent the totality African American, Latinx, or low socioeconomic urban experience, some novels offer complex, important perspectives.

If street fiction does make its way to the classroom as a central text in an English class, there are a number of considerations educators must make before they begin reading. The fact that the texts offer insight into issues like mass incarceration, sexual exploitation or abuse,

poverty, homelessness—the list goes on—means teachers must be prepared to ground sensitive issues like these with related texts that explore these problems from new angles, be they sociological, philosophical or otherwise, so that students see that resisting a “single story” (Adichie, 2009) is as much a part of an informed study of street fiction as any question of texts’ literariness. Reading *Picture Me Rollin’* with some of Imani Perry’s *Prophets of the Hood* or reading Snow with Sudir Venkatesh’s *American Project* (2000) or Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* would go a long way toward framing a nuanced study of street fiction texts, and this kind of critical framing and purposeful juxtaposition puts students in a position to decide for themselves what street fiction authors get right—or wrong—about the streets.

“Learning a different way”: The power of writing and the purposes of fiction.

Though I have devoted considerable attention to the possibilities street fiction may hold for readers, I would also like to address the way the genre might be useful in reframing writing. Reading and writing are intertwined skills and processes, and just as some street fiction may foster a special relationship to the act of reading, the genre also seems to embrace some powerful messages about writing. English educators with an awareness of the connections among reading, writing, identities and worldviews understand that: “Reading is fundamental to the development of a thoughtful writing self. Rich and wide-ranging reading experiences affirm the complex pleasures inherent in the human experience and the communicating of those experiences through writing. Reading helps you see yourself in a more-dimensioned way, which then helps you better see others in a more-dimensioned way, thus helping you write something of meaning and critical value about both. Reading provides crucial knowledge to help you identify your writing interests so that you can understand what you might choose to write *for* in your life, or what you might

write *against*” (Zigo, Dunlavey Derrico, & Paley, 2009, p. 185).

The authors included in this study espouse a culture of writing that has a profound respect for the transformative, liberating power of the written word. Authors like K’wan Foye and Vickie Stringer credit writing changed the course of their lives, both as a source of income and as a space to offer sacred testimonies about life as they see it. Of the practical and personal benefits he derives from writing street fiction, Foye remarked:

Street fiction came along because they’ve found books that they can relate to. Look at it like this, a lot of authors who are writing this stuff were doing negative things with their lives before they found an outlet like myself and others who came home from jail and had been writing book after book while they were in prison. They found a way; they found their magic; their niche through these stories. It’s like, “As long as I have something constructive to do to fill my time and to feed myself and my family, I don’t have to focus on negative things. You don’t have to worry about me climbing in your window, or pulling you out of your car anymore, because I’m not on that. I’m learning a different way.” If you open yourself up to the craft, the craft will open itself up to you. [...] Street Fiction was just a way for us to express ourselves. It was never about money, because none of us were getting any money back then. It was a way for us to express ourselves and to tell the stories of our neighbors, our family, our people; kind of like griots. You know, when you pass the story down from one to another. (Lewis, 2012)

As she discussed her role as a street fiction publisher, Vickie Stringer expressed a similar idea about the ability of writing to change people’s lives. She said: “When I was a hustler, I used to put packages in shorties’ hands, and I thought I was giving them a chance, but really I was dealing them death,” Stringer says. “There’s people that I gave packages to that are doing life in prison, people who wound up getting murdered trying to sell drugs that I gave them, so now, when I’m able to give someone a book deal, I’m giving them life. God gave me a second chance so I use that opportunity to give others a second chance too” (Thomas, 2016).

These examples show that Foye and Stringer find an intimate connection among their writing, their lives, and their communities. For Foye, making a living as a writer means he does not need to resort to criminal acts to make a living, but it is also much more than that. By

“open[ing] himself up to the craft,” Foye found a way of linking his stories with the longstanding tradition of storytelling in the African diaspora. The dialogical relationship he has with his writing allows him to reshape his life as he reworks his stories. From Stringer’s point of view, writing is a way of correcting the damage she did to her community when she was dealing drugs. I see both of these transformative conceptualizations of writing as powerful models for English students who are likely in the process of developing their own writing identities.

Some evidence suggests that readers of street fiction are hungry for mentor writers who can show them how tell their stories, such as the following anecdote from Kenji Jasper. Jasper never engaged in the criminal acts that are featured in his novels, yet he reports taking pride in the way men who have experienced such acts sanction the authenticity in his writing by validating his work. He suggest that the honesty of his representations of urban Black men in his novels inspires others to write:

I think the interesting thing is [...] whether I am talking to kids in the prison system or what have you, the assumption was made that in *Dark*, the main character, Thai Williams, was an autobiographical character...that I had killed somebody or at some point been in jail or what have you, which I think is a compliment. Coming from guys who had done it and who were wearing the orange jumpsuits, who were still out there struggling on the streets, to have those guys come up to me and say hey man, I really want to write. I remember when *Saving Salamanca* came out a man named Derek Adams who I had gone to junior high with he came to the reading and he was there saying, man, I really want to get into this writing, and he was there crewed up with three or four guys and I could tell that none of them had been to a book signing before. They came and guys from my neighborhood came...it was really interesting that before street lit they didn’t see their lives as important. And now, 20 years later, that whole experience has kind of laid the groundwork for a cadre of creative work—some authentic and some extremely false—but I think it generally continues to fuel the general perception of what Black men are, particularly Black men from the city. To sit back and look at that has been an intriguing experience. I’m really proud of the reactions I’ve gotten and the effect the work has had on those who read it. (Turpin, 2013)

Jasper’s comments reveal his interest in helping dismantle the concept that good writing

only comes from officially sanctioned people and places. He participates in guiding others toward a new definition of writing that is more inclusive, relevant, and socio-politically aware.

In many of the interviews I encountered, authors gave writing advice to young people, particularly those growing up in neighborhoods like the ones that are featured in street fiction novels. Sofia Quintero had the following suggestions for her audience:

Give yourself permission to write what you want to read. Write the story that you wish had existed in a difficult period in your life. Don't write what you know. Write what you want to know. Write to know yourself, and others will find themselves in your story. Appreciate your literary icons, support them, learn from them, but for all our sakes, don't try to be like them. You feel compelled to write because the stories within you do not reside anywhere else. If you're trying to be the next Toni Morrison or the female equivalent of Junot Diaz or that Latina Octavia Butler, stop: you're playing too small and are suffocating your own voice. You should only be emulating your inspiration with the objective of internalizing why what they do is effective as you develop your own unique voice (Reichard, 2016).

Quintero's advice imparts artistic license to young people who wish to write. She sanctions their writing, placing the young authors and their voices at the center of the task, implying that their stories are both relevant and urgent, and that the young authors themselves are capable of determining which stories are real, important, and worthwhile.

The concept of writing as a transformative force in one's personal life and in the world along with the message that all young people, no matter where they are from, have meaningful stories to tell, have compelling implications for writing instruction. Scholes argues that "the historical goal of English as a discipline should begin and end with where we—our students and ourselves—are now. What are the texts, the events, the ideas and the forces that have made our present world and continue making it every day? How are we to understand this world—and which texts can tell us the most about it or currently have the most to do with shaping it?" (158) Educators can capitalize on the dynamic power of writing established in street fiction to break

down the distance students may feel between themselves and the writing process. They can design instruction that includes a dialogical relationship among the self, the writing and the world to fuel the reading and writing lives of young people. Doing so, educators could combat unfortunate misconceptions about the relevance and purpose of writing in people's lives. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire wrote that "the word is more than just an instrument that makes dialogue possible; [...] there is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. [...] To exist humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in turn reappears to the *namers* as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. Men are not built in silence but in word, in work, in action reflection" (1970, 75-76). Street fiction positions its readers as potential "*namers*," as agents capable of transforming the world for themselves and in the eyes of others. The possibility for praxis through the reading and writing of street fiction could be an incredible asset for educators looking to spark similar relationships among the reader/writer, text and worlds through classroom experiences.

While street fiction may be rich new academic terrain, educators must recognize the personal pain and trauma that may be triggered when readings like these are brought into classrooms. The material requires sensitive handling so that students do not feel their lives or the lives of people they care about are being exploited, stereotyped, or otherwise mishandled in the classroom. In addition to laying the groundwork for respectful discussions and explicitly teaching disagreement, teachers can leave spaces for students to have private, personal responses to sensitive material. In the case of students who may be new to talking about issues or race, class or gender in academic spaces, can model conversations and provide initial low-risk opportunities through journal writing or small group discussion before they have to share their

ideas with a large audience. In addition, educators can accept that silence is a valid response (Schultz, 2009), and they can open up frequent opportunities for students to reflect on their learning and offer critical feedback about instruction. These are some of many strategies for creating classrooms that show students their teachers care about the forces that act on their lives, and that they value for their interpretations and their identities.

Books unbound: Culture, process and commodity. Street fiction invites readers to think about how books come to be. The genre hinges in part on knowing the story behind the book; how the authors came to be writers, how lived experiences became stories, and how those stories came to be commodities and cultural units, either through grassroots, community-based methods of production or through traditional publishing. Street fiction novels often invite a kind of transparency of process and of origin. For instance, Vickie Stringer briefly explained the unusual steps Triple Crown Publications' took to bring nontraditional authors' books to the marketplace: "Almost all of the manuscripts that we get come in handwritten [...] We type them all up, edit them and select the best writers out of the bunch — a major [publisher] would never do that" (Cunningham, 2005). Exposing readers to the processes of writing and publishing invites them to participate. Demystifying the production of books helps readers see the relationships among the text, author, reader and publisher more clearly. By doing so, readers may better grasp the power dynamics that bring popular genres like street fiction forward to challenge dominant ideologies through the ebb and flow of culture. Students may come to learn that "all popular culture is a process of struggle [...] over the meanings of social experience, of one's personhood and its relations to the social order and of the texts and commodities of that order" (Fiske, 1989; 26). How the text is produced, distributed and shaped for audiences is not a

question we entertain often enough in English classes, yet it should be central to our discussions if we want to increase transparency and thereby empower readers as critical thinkers. As they develop this knowledge, students may develop a heightened awareness of their agency as consumers and producers of culture.

Implications For Future Research

There are a number of implications for future research that come from this study. While I have tried to delve into a few spheres of influence that touch street fiction, further research is needed on the intertextual connections among street fiction and films such as those that came from the American gangster tradition, the 1970s blaxploitation era, and the New Black Realism period of the 1990s. Street fiction often reads cinematically, and explorations of how these three spheres of influence shape the landscape of street fiction would be fruitful and beneficial to anyone looking for a deeper knowledge of the genre. Similarly, the themes and tensions I explore in chapter four are by no means exhaustive, and while I have not undertaken a detailed study of aspects such as representations of gender and sexuality, particularly as they intersect with racial identities, these issues, among others, merit further study within the street fiction genre. Regarding the content of the texts, research charting how the themes and narratives evolve and change over time would be helpful in spotting new trends within the genre.

As to publication, the story of street fiction would be clarified with better data on book sales at the local and national levels, along with more research on how the books arrive in the marketplace. What is negotiated between authors and publishers, and what kind of criteria are publishers using to determine whether a book will sell? Do street fiction authors find ways to maintain independent channels for book sales, and if so, how? What do authors and readers feel

is gained or lost as street fiction expands to larger and larger markets? These are just a few of the questions regarding the commercial aspects of the genre, but these dynamics are important to discussions of the genre.

My initial goal in studying street fiction was to research how a group of young people responds to the texts, and I continue to support this as a future area of inquiry. While a number of concerned parents, teachers and critics have worried over what effect street fiction has on young readers, data to either support or refute their concerns is scarce. Classroom-based and community-based reading programs or educational settings that use street fiction should record ethnographic research that offers insight into youth's interpretation of street fiction, particularly where Black and brown youth living in urban communities have an opportunity to grapple with issues of authenticity and representation raised by the novels. Some of the research I have seen suggests that intergenerational reading (such as reading among mothers and daughters) takes place with this genre, and I am curious to learn more about how and why those exchanges happen and what kinds of dialogue result from sharing these texts.

Though the practice of reading street fiction has often been attributed mostly to young women, I believe that more and more young men reading the genre. My hunch comes from two observations I have made since I first encountered street fiction, one being that there are more male authors making the best-seller lists than there were ten years ago, and two, that there are more books featuring male protagonists. Researchers who care about literacies in the lives of young Black and brown men would do well to consider how street fiction may foster reading among this demographic.

I would also welcome the opportunity to learn more about how street fiction is read by multiple audiences, not only Black and brown youth. We know very little about who reads street

fiction outside of urban communities, but we do know that the books sell nationwide. If street fiction were taught in a classroom with predominantly White, middle- to upper-class students, I would be interested in seeing both how teachers structured the learning and how students engaged with the texts. What questions or responses arise for these readers, and how does their engagement with the text compare or contrast to that of the primary audience? What aspects of the texts resonate with both sets of readers, and how do teachers prepare different groups to read street fiction based on their prior knowledge? While there is plenty of food for thought in street fiction for any reader, I wonder how age, racial identity, class status and life experiences shape what people take away from the texts.

The Last Word: Toward a Conclusion

Teachers cannot be shy about engaging the political, the cultural or the historical if they plan make the study of English relevant to the lives of their students. At times, this is difficult work. However, conceptualizations of English education disregard the political, the popular, or the identities and worldviews of students jeopardize the discipline's future. Scholes explains the turn toward the political "is a direct result of an awareness that not only history but literature as well is mainly written by the victors and the dominators or those who seek their favor, and this is true in the polite world of letters as well as in the larger world of political conquest [...]" Responsibility here must take the form of establishing a disciplinary framework strong enough to allow the political full play in the study of textuality. By being responsible in this way, we will not suppress the power and beauty of language that have always been our concern. We will simply resituate them in a more rhetorical and less literary discipline of thought and study" (Scholes, 1998; p. 153). Teachers must recognize that no curriculum is apolitical or neutral

(Apple, 1993; McLaren 1994), and they must attend to the power and significance of their textual inclusions or exclusions. Allowing texts like street fiction into the classroom can help to restructure and reform English, making it a more forward-thinking discipline with an awareness of how the political has already shaped what and how people read and write.

Deeper, more nuanced readings are always possible using critical theoretical lenses, and educators can use street fiction to develop the tools necessary to read street fiction texts in empowered ways; attending to the cultural, historical, linguistic, social and political positionalities and identities present in the genre. In his short but important essay entitled “Why how we read trumps what we read”, Gerald Graff debunks the notion that there is a “direct relation between the value of the texts...[educators] assign and the value of educational experience they offer” (2009, p.66). While Graff stops short of saying it does not matter which texts teachers assign, he makes a compelling case for providing “students with models of criticism for talking and writing in a literate way about any kind of text” (Ibid., p. 73). If educators would like to see students read street fiction and other texts thoughtfully (as I have attempted to do in this study), they can arm students with new frameworks for reading (or writing) street fiction by introducing them to cultural studies, African American literary theory, and postcolonial theories pertaining to literature. Being open to street fiction does not require anyone to accept the misogyny or glorify the violence in its pages. Teachers can call attention to the contradictions in street fiction and lead students to puzzle together over what social, political and personal factors might contribute to conflicting messages in the narratives. Teaching it through theoretical lenses gives students a set of transferrable skills and ideas they can apply again and again to all kinds of texts, no matter their academic cachet.

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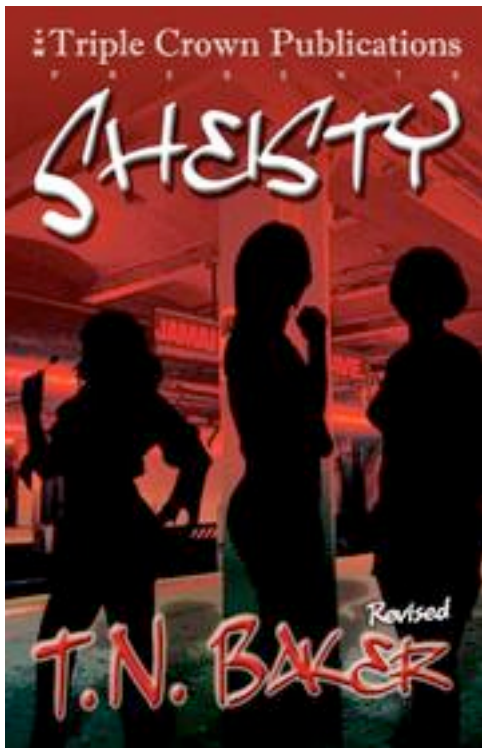
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Appendix

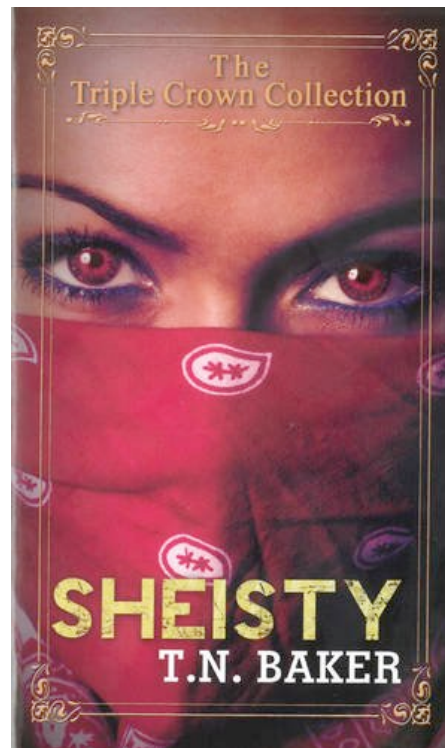
Table 1: Readability scores of street fiction novels and high school English texts

TEXT AND AUTHOR	AVERAGE READABILITY SCORE
STREET FICTION TEXTS	
Picture Me Rollin' (Black Artemis)	7.7
Dirty Red (Vickie Stringer)	6.0
Harlem Girl Lost (Treasure E. Blue)	7.1
TEXTS USED IN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH	
House on Mango Street (Sandra Cisneros)	6.5
Fahrenheit 451 (Ray Bradbury)	6.8
The Perks of Being a Wallflower (Stephen Chbosky)	3.4

Figure 1: Book covers of *Sheisty* by T.N. Baker, originally published by Triple Crown Publications in 2004; republished in 2015 under Kensington's Urban Books imprint.



Baker, T.N. 2004. *Sheisty* [book cover]. Triple Crown Publications.



Baker, T.N. 2004 (2015 reprint). *Sheisty* [book cover]. Kensington/Urban Books.

Figure 2: Images of street fiction novel covers from Kensington's Urban Books imprint (www.urbanbooks.net/books) captured March 14, 2017

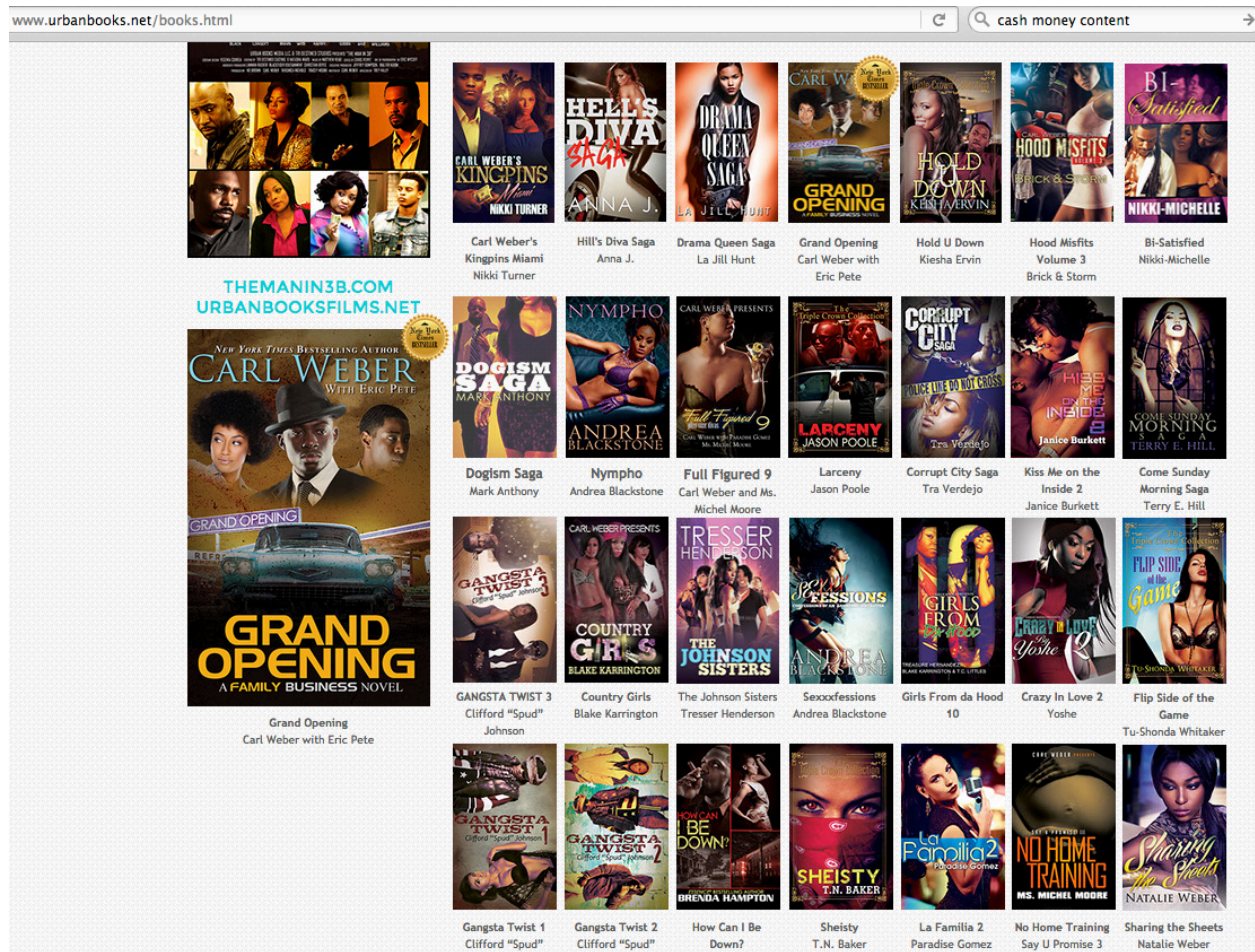
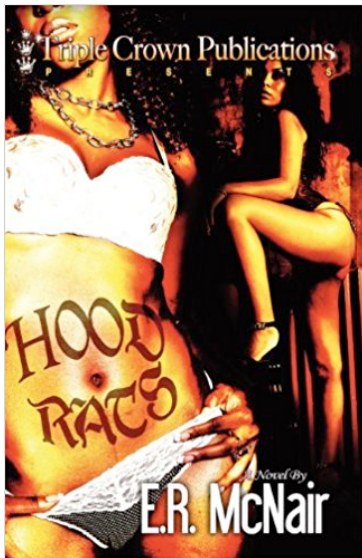
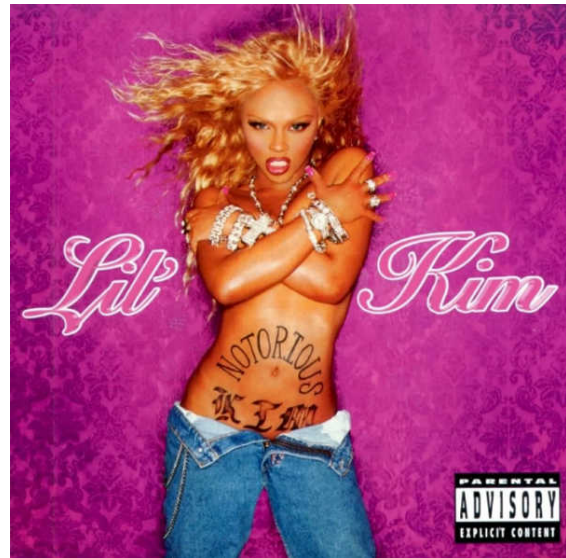


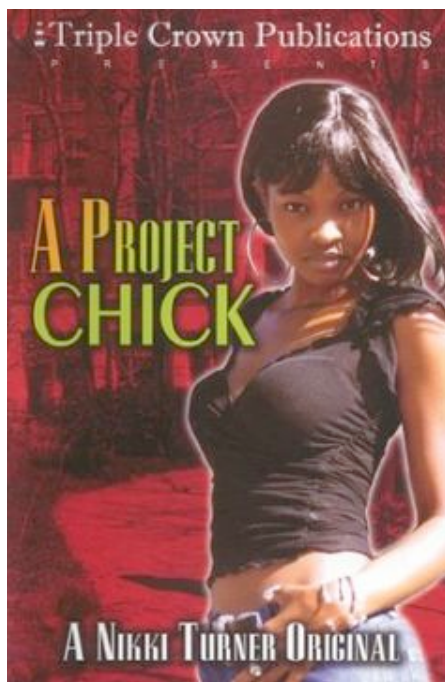
Figure 3: Images of street fiction novel covers in conversation with hip hop album covers



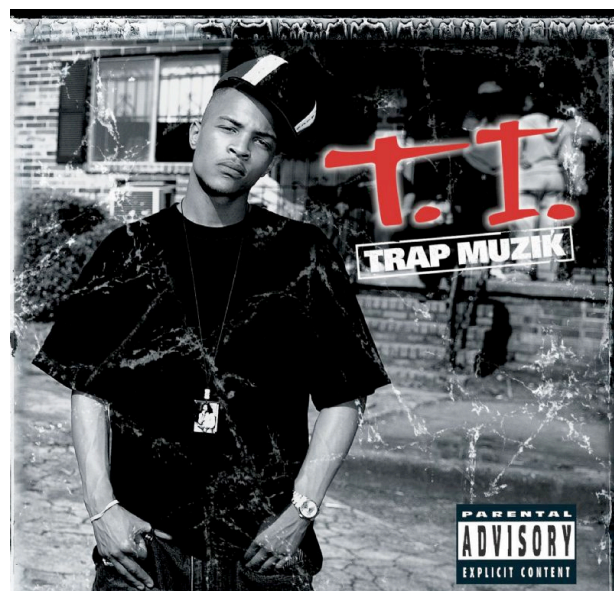
McNair, E.R. 2008. *Hood Rats* [book cover]. Triple Crown Publications.



Lil' Kim. 2000. *Notorious K.I.M.* [album cover]. Atlantic Records.



Turner, N. 2003. *A Project Chick* [book cover]. Triple Crown Publications.



T.I. 2003. *Trap Muzik* [album cover]. Grand Hustle Records.

Figure 3 (continued): Images of street fiction novel covers in conversation with hip hop album covers



Ervin, K. 2002. *Hold U Down* [book cover]. Triple Crown Publications.



Erik B. & Rakim. 1987. *Paid in Full* [album cover]. 4th & B'way Records.



Moore, S. 2009. *Baby Girl* [book cover]. Triple Crown Publications.



Brown, Foxy. 2008. *Brooklyn's Don Diva* [album cover]. Entertainment One Music.